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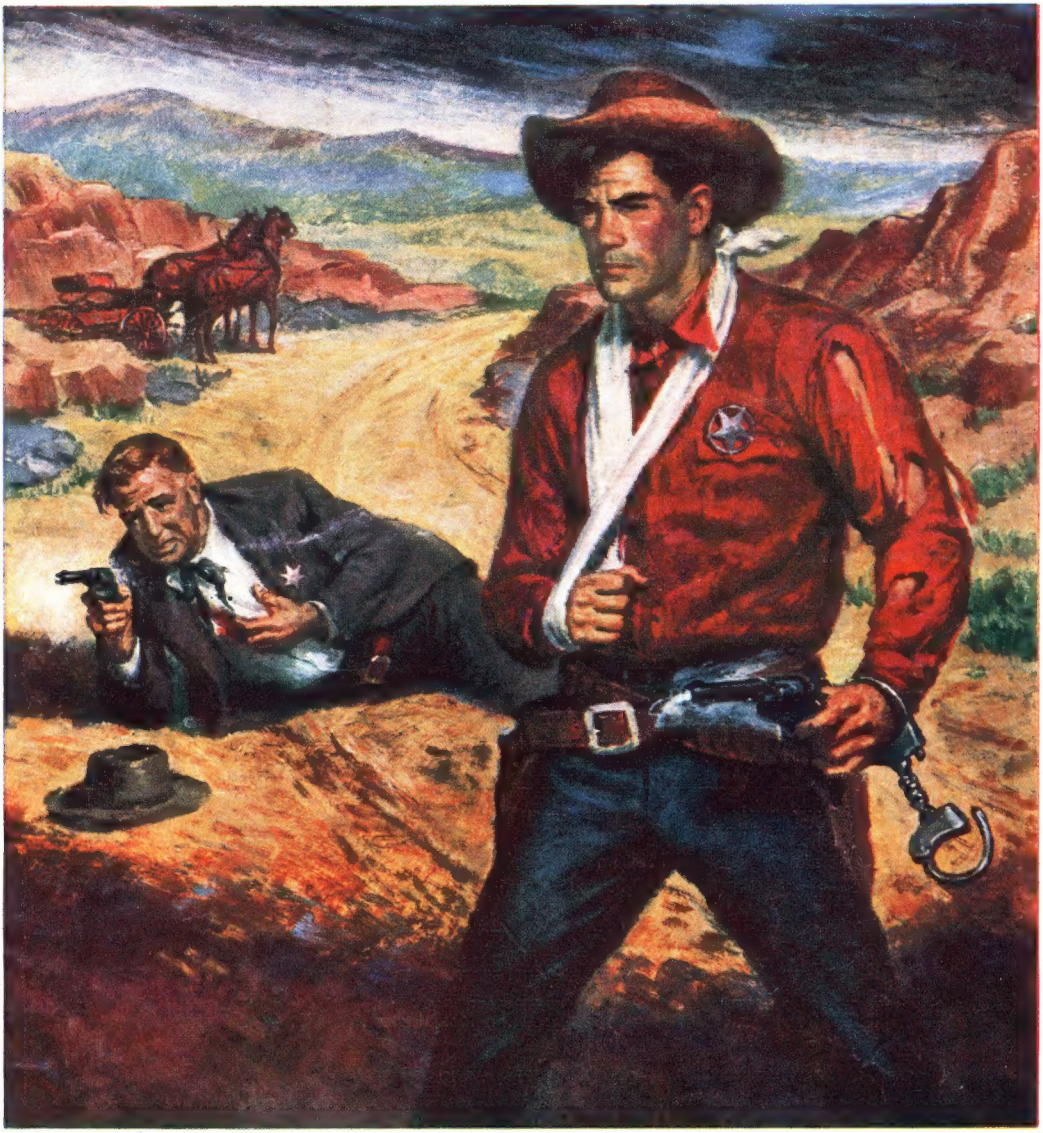

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 56, No. 2 OCTOBER, 1954

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

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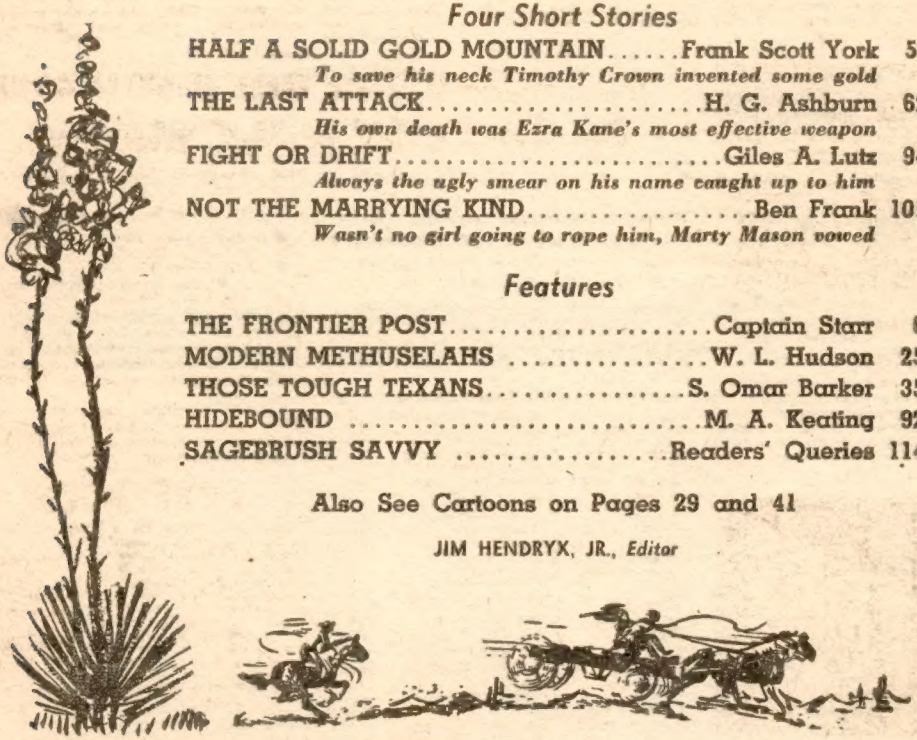
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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The Skullduggery of Big Nose George

OUT ALONG Wyoming way, there are some citizens who will tell you that the toughest and orneriest of all the Western bandits was not Jesse James or the Younger brothers, or any of the others you hear so much about, but one George Parrott.

The reason that he never gained the national prominence and recognition of some of the other gunslingers, it seems, is because of his monicker. He was called "Big Nose George." But while the nickname was accurate enough, referring as it did to the long curving beak that hung over drooping handlebar mustaches, there was apparently a touch of humor in the name that had the effect of his not being taken as seriously as some of his contemporary train-robbing, stagecoach-terrorizing bandits.

Bad Hombre

Proof, though, that "Big Nose George" was a very murderous and sinister character are two tombstone monuments that to this day stand on a lonely prairie near Rawlins, Wyoming. They were erected by friends of two possemen who lost their lives in an ambush brought about by Big Nose George.

These two pieces of marble reflect more than just the decease of a couple of the big-beaked bandit's victims. They help reveal what an utterly ruthless and conscienceless individual he was. For what so enraged the folks around Rawlins in connection with the particular railroad holdup attempt of Big Nose George, which led to the death of these two possemen, was not so much the money involved but the way in which the attempt was made.

The Union Pacific Railroad had a construction camp at the nearby town of Carbon, and Big Nose George learned that a Union Pacific pay car, part of a regular passenger train, was on its way to Carbon with money for the men.

So, on a mid-August day in 1878, Big Nose George and his gang went into action. On a downhill curve just east of Carbon they pulled spikes from the track and then attached a length of strong wire to the rails. The plan was to jerk the loose rails out of place as the engine came into the bend, throwing the train down a ravine.

Many passengers undoubtedly would have been killed in the wreck, which fortunately never came about because of the sharp eyes of a railroad section foreman who just happened to be walking along the rails and spotted the wire. Sensing the presence of the outlaws behind the nearby brush, the foreman didn't stop but continued whistling nonchalantly as he strode along. Once out of sight, though, he broke into a run and was soon spreading the news in Carbon. A heavily armed section gang repaired the tracks at the bend, and the train came in bristling with rifles and behind an advance engine manned by guards.

Hot Trail

So Big Nose George, who later revealed he'd been all for shooting the meandering section foreman but had been prevented by his gang, didn't get a dime out of this effort of his. But what enraged everyone in the vicinity was the cold-blooded scheme he'd planned. A posse was formed to track down the fierce-beaked outlaw.

Riding ahead of the main body of the posse, hot on the trail of the desperadoes, were Tip Vincent, a railroad detective, and Bob Widdowfield, a mine boss. They rode into Rattlesnake Canyon and reined to a stop at a clearing.

Widdowfield dismounted, knelt by some ashes and, laying a hand on them, remarked

to Vincent, "It's hotter than hell around here, Tip. We'll have them before night." They were his last earthly words.

A bullet from Big Nose George's rifle caught Widdowfield in the mouth killing him instantly. Vincent, attempting to ride out of the ambush, was spun out of his saddle by a fusilade of shots.

For two more years Big Nose George continued to flourish flamboyantly, even taking on the Army by robbing it of one of its payrolls. A song that was sung in those days went:

This George, he robbed the U. P. trains
And double-crossed his pals
And freely spent his stolen loot
A-boozin' with the gals.

The first of Big Nose George's gang to be captured was Dutch Charley. A crowd snatched him from the law and, determined to exact its own justice, placed one end of a rope around his neck and the other around the crossarm of a Rawlins' telegraph pole.

When someone asked the gunman if he had anything to say, the sister-in-law of the slain Widdowfield stepped from the crowd, said, "No, the son of a bee has nothing to say!" and kicked the barrel out from under him.

Rope Justice

Big Nose George, upon his capture, which was the result of too much carousing and bragging of his evil deeds, confessed in detail to a string of holdups and shootings and was ordered by the court to be hanged.

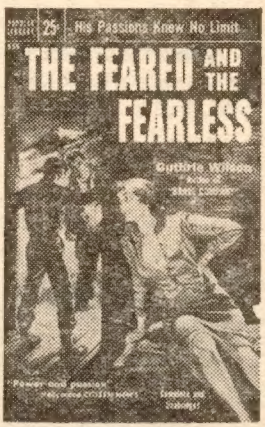
However, on the execution day, Sheriff Isaac C. Miller of Carbon County wrote on the decree that he "could not execute the prisoner because on the day appointed for the execution George Parrott could not be found."

This was perhaps the all-time understatement of any law enforcement report. What had happened was that, a few days earlier, the citizens of the area had snatched Big Nose George from the jail and lynched him, too.

For many years his skull was used by the doctor who witnessed the lynching and pronounced him dead as a doorstop, but Big Nose George and his infamous doings will always be remembered out that way by the two prairie monuments to a couple of brave possemen who lost their lives but gained a niche in imperishable Western lore.

She fled from WAR ...into a MURDER TRAP!

Maria sought escape in the powerful arms of Markham Faulkner, steel-nerved leader of the Italian Underground. But all her hopes were shattered when she realized — too late — she'd become the helpless pawn of Italy's most brutal killer.



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The DEEPEST

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

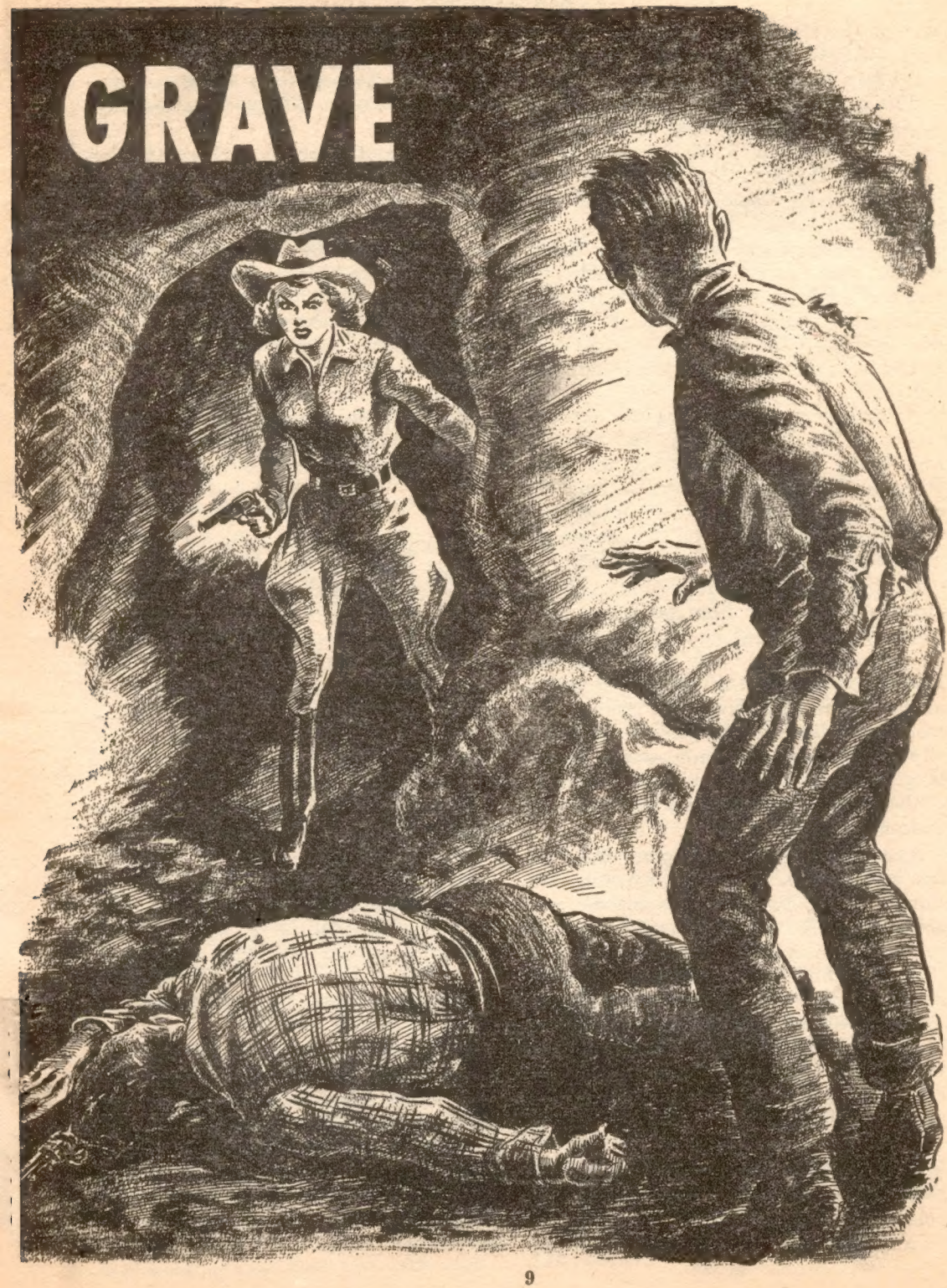
Had the young Ranger gone bad? Or had he met his end, as the Lone Wolf was slated to meet his, in the deepest grave in Texas?

CHAPTER I

Six-Gun Greeting

NIGHTFALL overtook Jim Hatfield an hour's ride short of Laplata, but the urgency of his mission to the remote mining camp kept him in saddle. An overcast hid a full moon riding the West-Texas sky. He could not follow the inky gut of the canyon road without giving his golden stallion its head.

Quite unexpectedly the sorrel rounded a bend and Hatfield saw the lights of Laplata sparkling at canyon's end, silhouetting the iron skeletons of head frames marking the various mines. The dull rumble of a fifty-stamp reduction mill trem-


GRAVE

bled on the air, like the unbroken roar of surf. Hatfield's nostrils caught the chemical odors from a smelter's fuming stack.

This was Laplata, the silver camp where Ranger Sam Kile had come, three months back, to ferret out a high-grading gang. A rookie Ranger, Jim Hatfield's own protégé, whose Laplata assignment was his first job behind the star.

But several weeks back, Ranger Kile's weekly mail reports to Austin headquarters had suddenly stopped. To explore the reasons for young Kile's ominous silence was the reason the top Ranger in the outfit had been sent out to this Big Bend mining camp.

Hatfield reined up, feeling the exhaustion of a two-day ride that had brought him better than a hundred miles from Presidio. Telegraphed orders he had received there from the State capital had withdrawn him from a Rio Grande smuggling case he had been investigating.

Hatfield's hand lifted to unpin the silver-circled Ranger star from his faded blue work shirt. He lifted his right boot from stirrup, inserting the law badge into the hidden compartment in the leather lining of the Justin. In a few more minutes he would be riding into the glare of Laplata's street lights, and strange horsemen would be given careful scrutiny by the denizens of this camp. Texas Rangers might not be welcome here.

Sam Kile had come to Laplata under an assumed name, without showing his Ranger badge. Now Kile was missing, and according to the telegram Hatfield had received from Captain William McDowell—"Roaring Bill"—his superior in Austin, Kile probably was dead. When a Texas Ranger went two months without mailing in a field report he was usually presumed to be dead. For that reason, McDowell had ordered Hatfield to conduct his investigation under cover.

ROWELING his sorrel with blunt spurs, Hatfield murmured, "I'll hold up stabling you until I've checked at Sam's hotel, Goldy. Then you'll get the oats I been promising you."

Following the ore-wagon road between sprawling mine dumps, Hatfield headed into Laplata's single street, lined on either side by false-fronted buildings of unpainted clapboard.

Saloons and gambling halls and honky-tonks outnumbered the town's more legitimate business enterprises by about ten to one. But that was normal for a mountain camp this near the Mexican border, a town known to harbor men on the dodge, as well as a population of miners whose tastes ran to violent extremes where gambling and loose women and heavy drinking were concerned.

Flickering tar barrels illuminated a signboard on the wooden-awninged porch of a two-story building midway along the camp's twisting length:

BONANZA HOTEL, EST. 1871

Hatfield reined up at a hitch-rack fronting the Bonanza, and dismounted with the stilted awkwardness of a man who had been in saddle since before daylight.

Loafers gathered on the dark porch of the hotel sized up this tall, rangy stranger as he made his tie. Hatfield could sense the pressure of their interest on him—a man of anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five years of age with crisp black hair and sun-bronzed skin.

Without the star to identify him as the renowned Lone Wolf Ranger of whom all Texas was proud, Jim Hatfield appeared to be an ordinary saddle tramp. His stetson was sweat-stained and crusted with the soda and alkali of far deserts. Twin shell-belts girdled his flanks, sagging to the weight of bone-stocked Frontier .45s in greased holsters. His saddle-boot carried a Winchester carbine.

His batwing chaps were slung over a slicker-bound bedroll behind the cantle. The bibless levis he wore tucked into spike-heeled cowboots, revealed the saddle warp of his legs. Range riders were a different breed of man from the jackleg muckers who worked in the Laplata mines, but they were not uncommon in this camp.

Sam Kile had been put on this high-

grading assignment in Laplata because he had a miner's background, spoke a miner's language, knew a miner's habits. That was why Hatfield had suggested Kile for this investigation job, after the sheriff and mine superintendents in Laplata had found themselves unable to track down the leak of high-grade ore from the Spanish Queen diggings.

But something had gone wrong. Sam

JIM HATFIELD

Kile had to be dead, or seriously injured. Only that could have prevented him from communicating every week with his superiors in Austin.

Ignoring the porch loafers, Jim Hatfield trailed his spurs into the Bonanza Hotel lobby and approached the pot-bellied, bald-headed night clerk on duty at the register desk. At his approach the clerk reversed a dog-eared ledger and plucked a penholder from a bottle of ink, extending it to Hatfield.

The Ranger shook his head. "Just riding through. Ain't aimin' to bunk here. Thought I'd pay a little visit to one of your regular tenants. Hombre name of Pete Ramos."

The clerk headed up, eyes narrowing with interest.

"You're a friend of Pete Ramos?"

Hatfield nodded. Pete Ramos was the assumed name Ranger Sam Kile had been using here in Laplata. He had been employed as a mucker at the Spanish Queen Mine outside of town, but had registered at this hotel and had taken his meals in the Bonanza's restaurant.

The clerk scratched his bald pate. "Feller name of Pete Ramos paid a month's lodgings in advance—Room F, upstairs," he said, leafing through the pages of his register. "But he only slept here couple weeks. Ain't seen him since."

Hatfield rubbed his stubbled jaw, pretending surprise. He had expected something like this, after McDowell's telegram.

"You mean Pete checked out?" he asked. "Did he leave a forwarding address? Last letter I got give this hotel as his whereabouts."

The clerk shook his head. "That's the funny thing. He left all his possibles in his room. Expensive saddle, extra duds, even his shaving tools. That's been nigh onto nine weeks."

The clerk gestured toward a sign tacked to the wall that read:

UNCLAIMED BELONGINGS WILL
BE SOLD AFTER SIXTY DAYS

"Just last week," he said, "I cleaned out Ramos' room, locked up his stuff in the basement. Under the rules I could sell that stuff, but he'd paid in advance for four weeks' room and board, so I been delaying the auction. Hoping he'd show up."

Hatfield shrugged and turned away from the desk. "Well, *'sta nada.* Ramos always was a drifter. It ain't important."

Heading across the lobby toward the street door, he halted when the clerk called after him:

"This friend of yours, Ramos—he wouldn't be on the dodge, would he? Usually when a guest of ours skins out mysterious-like, he's on his way to the Rio Grande, and traveling light."

Hatfield said distinctly, "Pete Ramos wasn't an owlhooter. Fiddle-footed, but no sheriff's got him on his wanted list."

Returning to the street, Hatfield caught sight of a sign on the building next door:

WELLS FARGO EXPRESS
U. S. POST-OFFICE

He thought, Might as well see what Cap'n McDowell's got for me, and headed toward the express office.

The building was locked for the night, but one section of its front wall was given over to glass-doored mail-boxes for the benefit of patrons calling for their mail after hours.

From a pocket of his levis Hatfield took a small key, which would unlock postal boxes in scores of Texas towns throughout the length and breadth of the Lone Star State. These lock-boxes were rented locally to citizens working secretly with Texas Ranger battalions, and were in effect "message centers" where Rangers in the field could call for official mail from Austin, using assumed names on file at headquarters.

The secret Ranger box here in Laplata was Number 118. Unlocking it, Hatfield sorted through the dozen-odd letters there until he found one postmarked from Austin less than a week ago and addressed to his alias, James Hayes. This letter would contain information from Captain McDowell for Hatfield to pick up on his arrival here. The other mail was addressed to Pete Ramos.

After lodging Goldy in a nearby livery, Hatfield dropped in at a Chinese restaurant and enjoyed his first good meal in two days. Then, shouldering his warbag, he returned to the Bonanza Hotel and found the same portly clerk on duty.

"Changed my mind. Decided to hole up for the night."

"He signed the register, *Jas. Hayes, Cottula, Rafter N Ranch*" and dropped a silver dollar on the blotter. The clerk handed him a key with a brass disk bearing the letter "F."

"Third room on your right, upstairs. No bugs at this altitude. You can have breakfast any time after five."

Staring at the key, Hatfield said thoughtfully, "Pete Ramos' old room, eh?"

The clerk grinned. "Ain't been slept in since your pard hightailed it for parts unknown, Hayes."

Upstairs in Room F, Hatfield tossed his warbag on the sagging brass bedstead, opened a window and propped it up with a stick. Looking around at the austere, shabbily-furnished cubicle, he thought, "What became of you when you went out that door for the last time, Sam, old kid? We know you landed a mucker's job at the Spanish Queen where the high-grading is going on. But what happened to you?"

HE LIGHTED a coal-oil lamp, shucked his boots and shirt, and slit open the letter from Austin. Reading it, Hatfield's greenish-black eyes went bright with shock:

Dear Hayes,

Maybe I'm wrong in deciding Ranger Kile is dead. According to reports that have just come in from Sheriff Paul Deevers of Laplata, an hombre calling himself Sam Kile and sporting a genuine Ranger star has been using his authority to find out when the local Wells-Fargo stages are carrying Spanish Queen bullion.

Four of these shipments have been held up by a masked bandit. In two of these instances stage guards have been shot to death. Wells Fargo saw no connection between these robberies and Ranger Kile's innocent-sounding questions. But the Laplata express agent happened to be riding as a deadhead passenger on the last coach to be held up and relieved of its express box. A gust of wind lifted the road agent's mask. And here's where it hurts, Hayes.

That road agent was our friend Sam Kile! The express agent's identification was positive. For the first time since my connection with the Texas Rangers, it appears one of our force has gone wrong.

It's up to you to uphold the honor of the Rangers, Jim. My original orders still hold—find Sam Kile. But when you do, place him under arrest and confiscate his law badge. I know that won't be easy, Kile being your

friend and protege. But the evidence against him is conclusive.

Regards and luck,
McDowell

Sleep was long in coming to Jim Hatfield, saddle-weary though he was. Sam Kile betray his trust? Sam Kile defile his Ranger badge as a means of furthering a career as an outlaw? It seemed impossible. Hatfield has known Kile since he was knee-high to the loading gate of a Winchester. Sam Kile wasn't the stripe to go wrong, no matter what the temptations placed in his path. Especially on his first major assignment behind the star.

But Hatfield had to live up to his own oath. If Sam Kile *had* betrayed his trust, then he must be brought to justice as irrevocably as the high-graders Kile had been sent to Laplata to investigate. But arresting young Sam would be the toughest assignment Hatfield had ever been called upon to perform.

The last coherent thoughts in Hatfield's brain when sleep finally put an end to his mental torture were, He's been framed. Sam is innocent.

In the gray hour before dawn, the Lone Wolf breakfasted in the restaurant downstairs. The sun was just breaking over the rim of the gulch when Hatfield dropped in at the camp's jail office to inquire about locating Sheriff Paul Deevers. Deevers would be able to bring him up-to-date on the stage robberies which Ranger Sam Kile was supposed to have perpetrated.

A sleepy-eyed marshal greeted Hatfield. "Sheriff?" he repeated. "He's out of town. You'll find him over at the Spanish Queen Mine, southwest down the gulch. Spent the night with the super over there, Aaron Crockett."

Hatfield thanked him without identifying himself and returned to the stable where he had left Goldy. He had already decided to have a look around the Spanish Queen diggings, where Sam Kile's mysterious trail had vanished.

Aaron Crockett, he remembered, was the man who, at Sheriff Deever's urging, had originally called on the Texas Rangers for help in solving the high-grader mystery at the Spanish Queen. Thousands of dollars' worth of valuable ore was being stolen from Crockett's mine every month, obviously by a highly organized band of mine thieves, but Crockett's own investigations had proved as fruitless as had the one made by Sheriff Deevers.

Riding out of Laplata in the first bright light of sunrise, Hatfield spotted a weathered signboard which indicated a fork in the gulch wagon road, snaking off over the sear brown ridges to the southwest. The Spanish Queen Mine was located five miles out on that fork, according to the sign.

KEEPING Goldy at a comfortable lope, Hatfield tried to make up his mind as to his best procedure when he faced Sheriff Deevers and the mine super. Should he reveal himself at once as a Texas Ranger working in disguise, or pretend to be a tumbleweed cowboy passing through and wanting to look up his old friend Pete Ramos?

Crockett, as well as the sheriff, would know of Ramos' dual identity. It had been with Crockett's connivance that the young Ranger had been given work underground at the Spanish Queen, where the theft of high-grade ore had its inception. It was entirely plausible that some friend might drop by the mine.

Hatfield was revolving his uncertain plans in his head when, topping a cactus-mottled rise, he caught his first glimpse of the Spanish Queen ore dumps three miles away. They were a scar against the drab mountain background.

The road by which Spanish Queen ore was hauled to the Laplata smelter made loops and twistings off across that scab-rock-dappled valley. In the middle distance, Hatfield saw a pair of riders flanking a buckboard wagon, heading toward town.

Ten minutes later they met in mid-valley. One of the riders, was an uncommonly pretty girl around twenty. She was wearing whipcord breeches tucked into cavalry boots, a lemon-yellow silk shirt which accentuated the roundness of her breasts, and a white stetson held against

her sunny-gold hair by a chin-strap.

Her saddle companion was a spade-bearded man of fifty-odd, dressed in brown corduroy and a flat-crowned Keevil hat.

But it was the driver of the slat-bottomed wagon who held the Ranger's attention. He was a sturdily built man of around forty, and on his coat gleamed a silver star stamped "Deputy Sheriff."

He halted his two-horse team at Hatfield's signal. The girl and the older man reined up also, eying Hatfield curiously.

"Would you be Sheriff Deever's deputy, sir?" Hatfield asked, after tipping his stetson to the golden-haired girl.

The driver of the wagon said, "I'm Paul Deevers. Everyone calls me Sheriff. Anything I can do for you, stranger?"

Deevers spoke out of common courtesy, but Hatfield noticed that the man accompanying his wagon had come alert, eying this handsome young buckaroo who had accosted them with narrow-lidded intentness.

Hatfield hesitated, not wanting to state his business in front of the strangers with Deevers. He said, "I'd be obliged for a few words in private with you, sir."

Deevers wrapped his lines around the whip socket on the buckboard dash. Turning to the girl, he asked apologetically, "Mind riding on, Miss Weaver? You and Aaron?"

The girl laughed, gathering up her reins. "Of course not, Paul. Come on, Dad. Race you to town."

As the spade-bearded man was preparing to spur forward, Hatfield said, "Are you Aaron Crockett, sir? Super of the Spanish Queen Mine?"

The distinguished-looking man nodded. "I am. And my stepdaughter, Joanne Weaver. I don't believe I've met you, cowboy—"

Hatfield grinned. "You haven't. If the young lady won't mind, I'd like to speak with both of you men."

Joanne Weaver said, "Of course not!" and spurred her snow-white gelding into a gallop from a standing start.

Staring at Hatfield through the sifting dust, Sheriff Deevers inquired, "All right, young man. What's your name, and what can Crockett and I do for you?"

Hatfield said, "It's about Pete Ramos. I was told in town at his hotel that he has vanished."

Deevers looked startled. Before he could speak, Aaron Crockett had jerked a long-barreled sixgun from a holster under his coat and trained it on Jim Hatfield.

"Sheriff," the mine super bit out hoarsely, "here's your stage bandit. This is Ranger Sam Kile! Kile, get your hands up before I take justice into my own hands and knock you out of that saddle with a bullet!"

CHAPTER II

Ambush

PURE shock chained Jim Hatfield's muscles momentarily. It was not until he heard the ominous double click of Crockett's Colt coming to full cock that he realized the mine super was deadly serious. Hastily then the Lone Wolf dropped his reins and raised both arms hat-brim high.

"Hold on here, Crockett!" Hatfield laughed shakily. "Don't blow your cork. I'm not Sam Kile!"

Sheriff Deevers stood up in his wagon, a gun in his brown fist now, but the expression on his face showed the confusion of the Laplata star-toter.

"Then who are you?" he demanded.

Eying the leveled black bore of Crockett's revolver, the man on the golden sorrel said quietly, "I am Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger, Sheriff. I have means of proving that."

Crockett blinked in amazement. Then, his voice harsh, he growled:

"He's lying, Paul! If he shows you a Ranger badge as his 'proof', it's the same one he used at Wells Fargo to gain Plumeau's confidence before he pulled off those robberies and killings. He's Kile!"

Deevers hopped off the wagon, plainly respecting the mine super's word. Gesturing with his Colt, he said waspishly, "Step down, whatever your name is." He paused, a startled look crossing his face. "You say . . . You're claiming to be the Lone Wolf?"

Dismounting, arms aloft before the menace of Crockett's .45, Hatfield said, "Texas newspapers have given me that rather melodramatic and childish nickname, yes. Because I usually work alone. As I am doing on this case of Ranger Kile's disappearance."

Seeing Deevers hesitate, Aaron Crockett warned sharply, "This man is a killer, remember, Paul. Dehorn him . . . Kile, keep reaching. I'm not quite as gullible as my friend, the sheriff."

Moving in gingerly, as if he was meddling with a cocked bear trap, Paul Deevers removed Hatfield's bone-stocked .45s from leather and tossed them into the buckboard. Then he backed off a couple of paces, still holding a drop on the Ranger.

"Now then," he said on an exhaled breath, as Crockett thrust his own gun back into scabbard, "you dead certain this is Sam Kile, Aaron? The Ranger Austin sent over to investigate your high-grading?"

Crockett nodded emphatically, and was opening his mouth to speak when Hatfield said to the sheriff, "Wait a minute, Deevers! Didn't you meet Sam Kile?"

Deevers shook his head. "I was out of town when Kile reported for duty. When I got back, it didn't seem just right for a sheriff to be hobnobbing with a Ranger who was supposed to be an ordinary jackleg miner. And then Kile disappeared, and—"

Hatfield lowered his arms and swung around to face Crockett, who still remained in saddle.

"If you say I'm Sam Kile you're lying in your teeth, Crockett. I've got credentials to prove I'm Hatfield—and I don't mean just a tin star. For instance, McDowell's wire sending me to Laplata."

Crockett thrust out his bearded jaw. "I hired Sam Kile, didn't I? Masquerading on my pay-roll books as Peter Ramos? It's only been ten-twelve weeks ago. I couldn't be mistaken."

Hatfield's shoulders shifted heavily. He was remembering that he and Sam Kile were almost identical in build and coloring. It was barely possible that this mine boss *might* be mistaken in his identification after so long a lapse of time.

"How many times," Hatfield asked Crockett, "did you see Sam Kile face to face?"

Crockett shrugged. "Just once—the night he arrived at the Spanish Queen office. I signed him on and haven't seen him since. After all, a mine boss doesn't hang around with his men. And I got more'n a hundred and fifty muckers on my pay-roll."

"Besides which," Sheriff Deevers added, "Kile was supposed to be working under cover. He couldn't hang around with the big boss without making the other workmen suspicious—especially when some of 'em was stealing ore from the Queen, right under Crockett's nose."

CROCKETT fished out a gold watch. He said to Deevers, "I've got to hustle on in to town, Paul. Those Spanish Queen stockholders from Detroit are due on the noon stage. Can't keep those dudes waiting—not and hold my job for long."

Deevers reached in a coat pocket and drew out a pair of shiny steel handcuffs. Without protest, Hatfield held out his arms and felt Deevers notch the fetters over his wrists.

"Don't let this hombre slick-tongue you on the ride into town now, Paul," Crockett warned. "If you doubt my identification, bring him face to face with Harry Plumeau, the Wells Fargo agent. He'll tell you whether he is Jim Hatfield, like he says, or is Sam Kile, who shot two Wells Fargo's shotgun messengers off the box."

As Aaron Crockett spurred past him, Hatfield called, "Just a minute, Crockett! If you're honestly mistaken about me, that Wells Fargo man could be, too. After all, Plumeau got only a quick glimpse of the

bandit's face when the wind blew up a corner of his bandanna mask—"

Crockett grinned triumphantly. "You see, Paul? He's wise to how Plumeau discovered his secret." He repeated, "He's Sam Kile, all right."

Hatfield said, "When you saw Kile, was he smooth-shaven?"

"No, he had a month's whiskers," Crockett said. "So you razored 'em off, got different clothes. I'll grant you may be toting paper to prove you're Jim Hatfield. But if so, that just proves you ambushed the Lone Wolf somewheres and got his credentials . . . Bear that in mind, Paul."

Spurring his horse savagely, Aaron Crockett headed off down the bench road in the direction of the camp. Sheriff Deevers stepped over to pick up Goldy's trailing reins and led the sorrel over behind the buckboard, tying the horse to a rear slat.

Then, turning to face his prisoners, Deevers said, "Get aboard, feller. Don't bother about showing me your Ranger badge and papers."

Climbing into the seat of the buckboard, Hatfield said wryly, "You set a heap of store by what Crockett says, don't you?"

Mounting the wagon, Deevers unwrapped his lines with his left hand, holding his Colt .45 in his right.

"I'll grant you Crockett might be mistaken. We'll see what the Wells Fargo man says."

When Deevers had his team in motion, with Goldy jogging along in the dust behind the buckboard, Hatfield said, "You can telegraph Roaring Bill McDowell in Austin. He'll verify the fact that he sent me out to Laplata to check on Kile's disappearance."

Deevers grunted. "I've already told McDowell what happened to Kile. He's using his star to rob Wells Fargo stages. Or did, until Harry Plumeau spotted the bandit's face. Since then, you haven't dared show up in Laplata, have you, Kile?"

Hatfield grinned ruefully. "If necessary, damn it, McDowell can come out from Austin to identify me. Would that satisfy you?" Getting no answer to his question, he went on, "Did it ever occur to you that Aaron Crockett might have been lying, that he could be mixed up in that high-grading business himself?"

That intimation stung Deevers out of his lethargy.

"Aaron Crockett is as square as a section corner!" he exploded. "I've known him for twenty years. He saw Sam Kile only once, and by lamplight, with Kile wearing a beard, like he admitted. He might be mistaken in his identification of you, but if he is, he's made an honest mistake."

Hatfield settled back on the buckboard seat, aware that the handcuffs had been notched too tightly and were beginning to cut the circulation out of his hands. With Deevers in his present mood, he decided against asking the lawman to halt the team and loosen the manacles. Deevers might think his prisoner was planning a break. The deputy was not too bright.

DEEVERS said, when they had put half a mile behind them. "That's a fine horse you're forking. Looks like the one I've heard Hatfield owns. It ain't the one the stage bandit used on his getaways, I'll grant you that."

Hatfield said, "Then you're coming around to thinking sense, Sheriff. You know I'm Jim Hatfield."

"No such thing. All I said was you're riding a gold sorrel that could turn out to be Hatfield's. Like Crockett said, maybe you ambushed Hatfield. 'Course you'd want such a prime specimen of horseflesh for your own use."

Hatfield grinned. "It is a fairly well-known fact," he pointed out, "that Goldy is strictly a one-man horse. He wouldn't let Sam Kile touch a foot to stirrup."

A sudden stabbing pain caught Jim Hatfield in the right forearm, as if a red-hot branding iron had been slapped against his flesh. The impact of an unseen blow knocked the Ranger violently against the sheriff.

"No tricks, damn you—"

The sheriff was reaming his Colt into Hatfield's ribs when the belated crash of a

"Who are you?" demanded the star-toter

rifle shot reached his ears. With a hoarse bellow of alarm Sheriff Deevers whipsawed the lines and brought his spooked team to a halt.

"What the hell!"

Deevers was staring at the welling crimson stain showing through Hatfield's shirt. Numb with bullet shock, the Ranger regained his balance on the wagon seat with effort. Then he pointed wordlessly to the dashboard, where a rifle slug had ripped a splintery slot through the wood.

"Ambush—slug," Hatfield panted, feeling the viscid warmth of blood dribbling down his arm. With his wrists fettered with iron bracelets, he could not raise a hand to staunch the flow. "Up on the ridge —behind us—"

Paul Deevers stood up in the buckboard, eyes searching the skyline roundabout. The echoes of the drygulcher's Winchester had echoed off into distance. Nothing moved on the heat-shimmering rim of the hills which enclosed the road.

"I'll—lay odds," Hatfield panted, "it was your friend Crockett, doubling around us. Do something to bandage me, Sheriff. The bullet went—clean through."

Confusion gripped the Laplata lawman. He fumbled under the seat for a Winchester, eyes still raking the southern skyline for a trace of the hidden sharpshooter.

"Maybe I was the target," he said shortly. "A lawman's got plenty enemies in a burg as tough as Laplata."

Blood was flowing in bright-red streams under the sleeve of Hatfield's shirt now, dribbling in ruby droplets off the handcuff bracelet.

"We're sitting ducks out here in the open," Hatfield reminded, gritting his teeth against the pain of bullet-torn muscles. Larrup your team or else we better jump off and hunt cover."

Deevers shook his head stubbornly. "Whoever it was has ducked out of sight," he said. "No brush or rock cover around here. I'll bandage you up."

Holstering his gun, Deevers stripped off his coat and pulled out the tails of his shirt. Ripping a generous strip from the garment, he tore open the sleeve of Hatfield's shirt and had a look at the bullet wound.

"Just a graze," he reported. "Not deep enough to nick bone. Soon as we get to town I'll have a medico sterilize it with antiseptic."

Fashioning a crude compress and bandage, all the while keeping a sharp lookout for a return of the invisible gunman, Deevers succeeded in staunching the steady flow of blood where the bullet had creased his prisoner's forearm. Working clumsily, obviously in dread of a return attack which might be intended for him, he wrapped torn shirting around the compress and used the remainder of the cloth to make an arm sling.

"That'll do till we get to town, Kile," he said. Snatching up his lines he lashed the team into motion. "Unless our ambusher has ridden around to meet us up ahead. Might be our best bet would be to go back to the Spanish Queen."

COMING to a sudden decision, Paul Deevers hauled the team around in so tight a circle that he narrowly avoided capsizing the unwieldy buckboard. He whipped the team into a dead gallop, heading back along the flats toward Aaron Crockett's diggings.

The decision to avoid the hill road leading back to Laplata met with Hatfield's approval. Out here on the flats, a drygulcher could not get within easy range of the road. But remembering the lay of the land between here and town, Hatfield knew the ambusher would have plenty of cover.

Above the drum roll of hoofbeats, Hatfield heard a sudden spate of gunfire, coming from the ridge to their left. Through the screening dust he caught sight of a half-dozen riders suddenly topping the ridge, sunlight flashing on rifle barrels.

"Riders aiming to cut us off between here and the mine, Sheriff!" he bawled in Deevers' ear, realizing the sheriff had not spotted the riders streaking down the slope to block off their escape to the Spanish Queen. "We're outnumbered forty ways from the jack!"

Deevers caught sight of the converging horsemen then, seen through the flying dust. Terror made the lawman's weathered face blanch as he sized up the odds and realized this vehicle could never outrun the mounted attackers.

"Unlock these cuffs," Hatfield yelled, "and let me have my guns. Nothing to do but fort up behind those rocks yonder and fight 'em off!"

Deevers shook his head, lashing the team for more speed.

"No dice, Kile. If it's me they're after, I'm game to die. If you are Hatfield, and they're out to scalp a Ranger, it's my duty to defend my prisoner, and—" Deevers broke off suddenly dropping the reins and falling forward.

A gout of blood burst through a bullethole punched through his shirt, between his coat lapels. He had taken a random bullet square in the right lung.

Deevers would have pitched out of the wagon had not the handcuffed Ranger clawed into his coat lapel and dragged him down to the dashboard.

With desperate haste Hatfield got hold of the lines and brought the jouncing buckboard to a halt. Swirling dust clouds momentarily protected them. Through that screen the Ranger picked out the jumble of varnished lava rocks off the side of the road, which he had just pointed out as the only possible spot where they could fort up and defend themselves.

Paul Deevers was fully conscious, but crimson spume was beginning to show at his mouth corners. The man was mortally hit, bleeding to death inside.

"Handcuff key—inside coat pocket—" he got out painfully.

Wincing from the pain of his bullet-grazed arm, Hatfield pawed inside the sheriff's coat, found the tiny key. He put it between his teeth and unlocked the cuff from his right hand.

It was a time-killing business, crippled as he was, and Hatfield gave up trying to

get rid of the handcuffs. Pocketing the key, he reached under the seat to recover one of his sixguns, thrusting it in holster.

The dust was settling now and up ahead, over the heads of the trembling team, Hatfield saw that the riders had reached the road a quarter-mile ahead of them. Even as he stared, the Lone Wolf saw the ambushers begin spurring back along the road in their direction.

But it was not the approach of those killers that brought an involuntary cry from Hatfield's lips. It was sight of the rider leading the attack. A girl—a blonde with streaming tresses and a white stetson held to her back by a chin thong! A girl wearing a bright lemon-yellow silk skirt!

"Joanne Weaver's leading those buscaderos against us, Sheriff!" Hatfield gasped. "Now do you believe Aaron Crockett is after my hide?"

But the wounded deputy was slumped in a heap against the dashboard, blood seeping in bright rivulets from his lips.

CHAPTER III

Death

HOISTING the unconscious deputy over one shoulder, the strain on his bullet-nicked arm starting a fresh flow of blood under the crude bandage, Hatfield jumped to the ground.

He was reaching for Deevers' rifle when one of the horses screamed in sudden agony. His hide had been raked by a ricocheting slug.

The panicked team slewed around, nearly breaking the wagon tongue and almost upsetting the buckboard. Hatfield lowered Paul Deevers' inert weight to the ground and jerked a bowie knife from his belt sheathe, jumping to make a quick slash at Goldy's reins, tied to the rear of the buckboard.

As his sorrel leaped free of the careening vehicle, the sheriff's team bolted in wild stampede. But the horses were brought to a dusty halt a hundred yards away, tangled in the lines.

With the handcuff swinging from his left wrist, Hatfield yanked his Colt with that hand and laid three fast shots in the direction of the oncoming riders, though knowing they were out of range for a hand gun. A Colt thundered behind Hatfield, startling him. But when he wheeled to meet that fire he saw Paul Deevers, propped up on one elbow as he lay in the dirt, firing at the ambush party.

The countering gunfire had the effect of splitting the oncoming riders. Hatfield saw the yellow-shirted girl wave an arm, signaling two of the riders to follow her along the north slope. The remaining three riders veered south. Their intent was plain—box in their quarry, then close in for the kill.

Sheriff Deevers was dragging himself painfully toward the lava formation now, which Hatfield had previously pointed out as the only possible cover for them. Yelling at Goldy to follow, Hatfield hurried to give the wounded man a hand. Rifle slugs were boring in now as the ambush crew, careful to keep out of six-gun range, resumed their fusillade.

Copper-jacketed .30-30 missiles slammed into the lava boulders and shrieked off into space as Hatfield made it to the shelter of the outcrop, pulling Paul Deevers to cover. Goldy followed closely. Hatfield let go his grip on the wounded sheriff, to lead his saddler behind a twin lava upthrust which would shield the animal from anything but a glancing bullet. Their lives might depend on getting away on Goldy before this siege was finished.

The Ranger took time then to unlock the handcuffs dangling from his left wrist and toss them aside. Hauling his Winchester from his saddle scabbard on Goldy, he decided the arm sling was more hindrance than help. The cloth would do better service as a bandage for Deevers.

Wracking coughs were tormenting the lawman now, each one more feeble than the last. It was vital that the man's wound be bandaged to prevent bleeding, but before taking time for first-aid Hatfield had to keep the encircling riders at bay. Belly-

ing down, he crawled away from Goldy and passed the sheriff, who was writhing and moaning in agony, too far gone to join in their defense.

Resting his carbine barrel over a low boulder, Hatfield squeezed off a shot at a galloping gunhawk out on the south flats. The heavy report of the Winchester reached the ears of the riders out there and warned them that they were bucking a long-range rifle now, not sixgun fire.

Like quail, the encircling riders lined out for the nearest ridge. Wheeling around, Hatfield had a fleeting glimpse of the girl in the yellow skirt as she spurred her horse over the northern skyline and vanished.

Within moments, the landscape was empty of riders. But Hatfield was not deceived. As soon as they had picketed their mounts, those riders would be crawling back to the hilltops on either side of the flats, some with rifles capable of throwing lead into these rocks.

HE COULD not be positive that the girl was Aaron Crockett's stepdaughter, but the white hat and the yellow shirt made it seem conclusive enough. He remembered belatedly that Joanne Weaver had been mounted on a *blanco* gelding when she had ridden off in the direction of town. The woman he had seen leading the ambushers was on a piebald. But in the time that had elapsed Joanne could have joined accomplices and obtained another horse.

Paul Deevers was in bad shape when Hatfield got back to him. The Ranger loosened the black string tie at Deevers' throat and unbuttoned his red-stained white shirt. The bubbling bullet-hole was just to the right of Deevers' breast-bone. Six inches to the left, it would have pierced the lawman's heart, killing him instantly.

Using his arm sling for a compress, Hatfield managed to staunch the hemorrhaging externally, but he knew Deevers was bleeding inside and was past saving.

Deevers was semi-conscious, trying to talk. Hatfield wriggled back to Goldy, unbuckled a saddle pouch and came back with a pint flask of whisky. Not much of a drinking man himself, the Lone Wolf nevertheless always carried liquor for emergencies such as this. He reamed the bottle neck between Deevers' blood-frothed lips and forced a few swallows down the sheriff's throat.

The alcohol revived Deevers. The sheriff wheezed spongily, "Mistaken—about you—Hatfield. If you was Kile—you wouldn't be—helping John Law this way."

Hatfield helped the dying man out of his coat, wadding it up to pillow Deevers' head. The least he could do was make the sheriff's last moments as comfortable as possible.

"Deevers—can you hear me? Can you tell me anything about what you think might have happened to Kile?"

The dying man shook his head feebly. "Not—a thing. Last I knew—he was working in Number Seven shaft—Spanish Queen—the thousand-foot level. Maybe Crockett can tell more—"

Hatfield grinned bleakly. "I didn't have a good look at those riders out there, Sheriff. So I can't say for sure Crockett is one of them. But his daughter is."

Deevers' eyes came open, the swift approach of death glazing them.

"Not—Joanne. She's—the pure quill. Known her—since she was tomboy—in pigtails. That ain't—Joanne—in the yeller shirt—Hatfield. I'll—lay my last chip—on that."

There was no point in arguing the matter now. Hatfield was dribbling more whisky on the sheriff's lips when a rifle slug hit a lava rock close by and sprayed his cheeks with flying particles of grit.

"Hatfield," Deevers panted desperately, "I'm cashing—in my chips. I—know that. One thing—got to tell you . . ."

Hatfield bent closer, knowing the end was near for this lawman.

"Aaron Crockett—ain't no crook. My word—for that. He thought—you were Sam Kile. He wasn't—trying to frame you. He was honestly—mistaken."

Hiding his skepticism, the Lone Wolf Ranger said gently, "*'Sta bueno,* Deevers.

If you say so. If I get out of this jackpot alive I'll tell him what you said. He'd appreciate your loyalty."

A crackle of gunfire followed a hail of criss-crossing lead above the rocky outcrop.

Hatfield heard Goldy blowing his lips nervously, iron-shod hoofs pawing the rubble over behind the big rock.

Picking up his rifle, Hatfield moved away from the sheriff. Deevers was lying quiet now, seemingly in no pain, the anesthesia of approaching oblivion mercifully dulling the agony in his lung.

WORKING his way through the rocks until he came to a spot where he could command a view of the north side of the flats, Hatfield searched that heat-shimmering landscape for some trace of the gunmen firing on him. He thought he saw a shadow move behind a clump of agarita scrub midway up the hill, and laid a fast shot into it. He saw his bullet kick up a geyser of alkali dust short of the thicket. A jet of gunsmoke erupted from the agarita clump and simultaneously Hatfield felt his stetson jerk. He ducked back, removing his hat. A bullet had put twin perforations in the felt.

Squirming to a different location, Hatfield pumped three shots into the agaritas. They concealed at least one of the besieging party.

This time, allowing for elevation and other trajectory factors, he put his lead into the thicket. He was rewarded by seeing a figure, crouched low, go scuttling away from the brush and dive headlong into a shallow eroded gully.

The girl in the yellow shirt and white sombrero!

For an instant, as she wriggled her way to safety, Hatfield had his rifle sights lined squarely on that yellow-clad back. But he held his trigger, sacrificing a sure kill. He hadn't come out to this uncurried corner of Texas to fight women. Especially shoot them in the back.

He thought, It's got to be Joanne Weaver. She had time to cut over to some camp off the road and bring those riders. And if that's Joanne, it means Aaron Crockett is mixed up in Sam Kile's disappearance.

With all four points of the compass to cover, Hatfield made a circuit of the rocky outcrop. He saw no targets, but at intervals gunfire made crashing echoes over the flat, enough to pin him under cover. And vagrant smudges of gunsmoke picked out the hiding places of the besiegers—lone boulders out on open ground, shallow gullies in the far slopes, a prickly pear patch.

The heat was becoming unbearable. The ache in Hatfield's bullet-scratched arm was increasing, and he knew there was danger of infection, which made the superficial flesh wound potentially dangerous.

He decided to pour raw whisky into the wound as a sterilizing agent. When he worked his way back to Paul Deevers, he found the sheriff lying motionless, glassy eyes fixed unseeingly on the Texas zenith.

The sheriff was dead. Already, tiny black pin points were wheeling in the brassy bowl of the sky. *Zopilote* buzzards, their telescopic vision already locating human carrion down in these rocks.

Hatfield shuddered, laying Deevers' hat over his face. The sheriff had died without knowing who had shot him, or why. That bullet had been intended for Hatfield, the Ranger was convinced. Whoever it was out there, surrounding this rocky covert, wanted to send another Ranger to hell.

He poured what was left of the whisky on his wounded arm. The pain was excruciating but it might avert blood poisoning and an amputation—if he survived this man trap.

The firing had ceased now. Glancing at the sun, Hatfield believed he knew what the enemy's plan would be. Knowing their quarry had a rifle, they would not dare come in across the open ground for a showdown in daylight. They could wait out this day, shooting often enough to discourage Hatfield from attempting a break on Goldy. With the coming of darkness they could pull in close, in a circle of guns which no man could breach.

Time seemed to stand still. With the sun overhead, there was no shade here in these rocks. But Hatfield knew the heat was torturing his besiegers also.

HE KEPT an eye on the road leading to the Spanish Queen. If a string of tandem-hitched ore wagons came in sight, hauling concentrate to the reduction mill in Laplata, that would be his golden opportunity to break this impassé. The mining road was only a dozen paces from these rocks. When the ore wagons got alongside a man could duck from cover and clamber aboard, unseen in the dust, even by the driver of the jerkline string.

The sun passed nooning and began its westward descent toward the far-off Texas skyline. At two o'clock, not having drawn any fire for over an hour, Hatfield returned to Goldy and unslung his canteen, sharing the tepid water with his horse.

He knew though, that the gunhawks were still holed up on the north and south slopes. His constant vigilance kept them pinned down to their hideouts as certainly as their guns kept him here. They had their horses picketed over the ridge, out of sight.

As the afternoon waned, Hatfield saw no sign of traffic on the road, either from the direction of Laplata, or from the Spanish Queen. Except for the unseen menance of those guns waiting to cut him down, he might have been in a crater of the moon, so desolate was this spot.

Flies were swarming around Paul Deevers' corpse, the sound of their buzzing putting a knot in Hatfield's stomach. In the sky overhead were more buzzards now, swooping lower on motionless pinions.

He thought, If no wagons come by all I can do is wait for dark, then try to make a break for it on Goldy. And send the coroner back to pick up Deevers' body.

Shortly before sundown began painting the western sky with gold and scarlet, he noticed the pale disk of the moon, just off full, in the east. That meant bright moonlight would cut down his chances of a getaway when dusk had fallen. Darkness would enable his besiegers to pull in close, without detection, hugging the ground, but a man on horseback, attempting to break away from these rocks, would be a point-blank target.

The fact that Aaron Crockett and his stepdaughter had not appeared from the direction of town, returning to the Spanish Queen, was significant. It lent credence to the Lone Wolf's theory—not shared by Sheriff Deevers to the very end—that the Spanish Queen boss and the girl were among the guntoters keeping vigil on him.

There was no food in his *alforjas* for himself or for Goldy, and hunger pains were beginning to painfully knot Hatfield's insides.

His wounded arm was numb, but the bleeding had stopped.

The sun was just touching the horizon beyond the tailing dumps of the Spanish Queen mine when a rattle of wagon wheels attracted Hatfield's attention to the left.

It was the sheriff's team, heading off across country with the buckboard jouncing behind.

What had startled those horses, after spending this entire day grazing in the sparse bunchgrass up the road? Perhaps the furtive movement of an ambusher, already closing in.

The sheriff's rig vanished over a far ridge. One wheel of the buckboard had struck a rock, smashing it. The horses, dragging the wrecked wagon, were stirring up a big dust.

Blue dusk was pooling over the flats, the moon's rays not yet apparent, when Hatfield heard a voice break the intolerable silence:

"Start closing in, men. Any time now that pair may try a break. And shoot to kill!"

It was a girl's voice, yelling from up on the slope by the agarita thicket. Was it Joanne Weaver's voice? He couldn't be sure, at this distance. But whoever was yelling was the leader here, and had given orders to begin closing the trap on Jim Hatfield!

CHAPTER IV

"That You, Chipman?"

THE girl's shout told Hatfield one thing, at any rate. His foe was not aware that Sheriff Deevers had died during the day. They still believed they faced two pairs of guns here.

As twilight thickened in layers of magenta and indigo, Hatfield caught sight of a man in a red shirt and miner's boots who suddenly broke from cover across the road, leaving a weed clump to head for a protruding outcrop of bubble-pitted lava-rock.

Whipping his .45 from holster, the Ranger threw a snap-shot at the figure. He saw the man break stride, then pitch headlong behind the rock. But he did not withdraw his legs from view. His hobbed boots beat the dirt in brief tattoo, then went still. That one was either dead or unconscious.

"Shaved the odds by one," Hatfield muttered, reloading from his belt loops. Five to go, counting the girl.

His shot brought answering gunfire from three or four widely separated angles. Bullets pounded the rocks. One of them was followed by a high-pitched trumpet from Goldy, stashed out of sight behind Hatfield.

Panic touched the Ranger. Had a ricochet dropped his horse? He heard a slam of loose stirrups against rock, a clatter of iron-shod hoofs, then Goldy broke into the open, snorting in panic, in full view of those ambush guns!

"Goldy—get back there!"

The sorrel, perhaps stung by a spent bullet, gave no heed. Hatfield's heart sank as he saw his magnificent stallion hammer away from the rocks, galloping up the wagon road toward Laplata with empty stirrups flapping wildly.

Holding his breath against the expected slam and crash of gunshots which would cut his saddle horse down in its tracks, Hatfield heard only the receding drum roll of Goldy's hooves on the hard-packed adobe.

Gone were his chances of making a getaway on horseback! But tempering that despairing thought was a rush of relief that Goldy had escaped this death trap.

There was moonlight enough for the ambushers to know that the horse was carrying an empty saddle. As if to verify that, the girl's voice called out again, no longer from the gully midway up the north hillslope but down on the flat now:

"Watch it, boys! Deevers and that stranger will be busting out any time now. Lay low and listen!"

Deevers and the stranger. If that had been Joanne Weaver, she would have learned from her father by now that the stranger was Ranger Jim Hatfield. Yet she hadn't used his name.

Hatfield could hear abrasive sounds of boots and chaps-clad knees dragging over rubble. The circle of guns had moved in a great distance since sundown. He heard a chiming tinkle of a spur rowel, but couldn't locate the direction from which it had come.

This was the brief interval between the last of the sunset glare and the growing brilliance of the full moon. If he were to make a break on foot, it would have to be now, or never!

Deciding to abandon his rifle, knowing its barrel might give off betraying flashes of moonlight, Hatfield drew his bandanna neckerchief up over his face, masking the lighter color of his skin.

Then, belly to the ground, he wriggled away from the sheltering protection of the lava rocks where Paul Deevers' stiffening corpse lay.

For the first dozen feet he had low-lying bunchgrass clumps to shield him. Then he was at the edge of the road.

He cocked an eye at the moon. A ragged, fleecy-edged cloud formation was floating northward, pushed by a wind out of Mexico. In another moment it would cover the face of the high-riding moon. That would give him his chance to make it across the gray ribbon of road, into the

rocks and brush on the far side.

Hatfield was counting on having killed the bushwhacker he had seen jumping for the bubble-pitted lava boulder over there. That left a gap in the girl's cordon of man-hunters. Perhaps it had been fielled; perhaps not. It was a chance he had to take.

The moonlight faded as the silver disk was covered by the invading cloud mass. Vagrant sounds reached Hatfield's ear—scuttling movements, as skulking gunmen took advantage of this same momentary darkness to shift position, closer to the rocks.

Knowing the others would be busy, Hatfield palmed a gun and dragged himself lizardlike across the road. It was barely twenty feet across those adobe ruts, but it seemed like a mile before his outreaching hand touched the boulder behind which lay the man he believed he had dropped with a slug.

He moved cautiously around the rock, his exploring fingers touching a man's hairy face, and instantly recoiling. The touch reassured him of one thing. This owlhooter was dead.

He wriggled away from the corpse, making for a hedge of buckbrush a few paces beyond. The rim of the moon was just showing over the cloud bank to eastward when Hatfield burrowed into the brush clump—and found himself inches from a crouched man, face masked with a bandanna like his own!

He was close enough to touch the man's head, a shadowy silhouette under a flop-brimmed stetson. His nostrils caught the odor of chewing tobacco as the crouched man whispered hoarsely:

"That you, Chipman?"

The outlaw had presumably mistaken him for the dead man behind Hatfield, known to be at this perimeter of the cordon.

"Yuh."

Hatfield grunted the monosyllable, putting this gunman off guard long enough for the Ranger to pull his good arm free of the brush.

The hunkered man had a glimpse of moonlight blurring on blued gunmetal as Hatfield lifted his Colt. Before he could cry out the Ranger brought his .45 down in a lethal clubbing arc, smashing the man solidly across the temple. His victim wilted without sound, and the meaty, sodden impact of steel on bone probably had not carried far.

Hatfield released a pent-up breath. Now he had a real hole broken in the cordon, with two men in the same sector out of the deal. At last three others, and the girl, were strung out at unknown points across the road.

But it would be dangerous to tarry here, with the others moving unseen in the night. Keeping low to the ground, Jim Hatfield moved with increasing speed until he had reached the foot of the south hill. He began climbing, more boldly now, for he was positive he had broken through the ring of guns.

He was fifty feet above the level of the road when he heard a sudden break of hoofbeats, coming from the east. Sinking down the slope of the hill, Hatfield looked toward the glow in the sky marking the lights of Laplata. A body of horsemen topped the skyline and dipped down into the flats, following the town road toward the Spanish Queen.

THE riders were still a quarter of a mile away, beyond earshot of the girl's voice ringing out from north of the lava formation across the road:

"It's the super and his stockholders, boys! We've got to call this off until they're past us."

Answering voices sounded from several widely spaced points. Then the sound of running boots. Off across the valley, beyond the road, Hatfield distinctly saw the low-crouched figure of the girl, streaking back for the ridge top and her waiting horse.

The yellow shirt made an easy-to-follow target in this moonlight.

Scowling in puzzlement, Hatfield turned his attention to the oncoming riders. The mining road made a loop under his location on the ridge slope and, as they

passed, the Ranger recognized Aaron Crockett's spade-bearded face.

The other riders, four in number, rode stiffly, like Eastern dudes unaccustomed to saddle, their arms flapping like crow's wings to the cantering gait of their ponies.

Remembering what Crockett had said earlier, and which had just been corroborated by the mysterious girl's warning to her men, Hatfield realized that the men with Crockett were the capitalists he had expected to arrive on the Del Rio stage today. Spanish Queen stockholders, visiting the mine on an inspection trip. Apparently they had waited until the cool of night to make the horseback journey out to the diggings.

Coming alongside the lava outcropping where Hatfield had made his desperate stand throughout this interminable day, Aaron Crockett suddenly reined up. So did the dudes.

"Something white over in them rocks." Hatfield heard the mine super's voice carry distinctly across the windless night. "Mind if I investigate, gentlemen?"

Mumbled voices reached Hatfield's ears. He saw Crockett dismount and lead his horse over to the edge of the lava rocks.

"It's a dead man!" came Crockett's astonished voice. "By Jupitor, it's Paul Deevers! Our sheriff! No wonder he didn't show up in town."

Shocked exclamations came from the horsemen out in the road. These were effete Easterners, Detroit financiers whose mining interests had brought them West, and here was adventure.

"Why," one of them exclaimed, "it's just like one of Buntline's novels. The West is still wild—finding dead sheriffs in the rocks."

The Easterners were out of saddle now, gathering around Crockett, who was crouched by Deevers' body.

"That fake Texas Ranger, Sam Kile, killed the sheriff on the way into town!" came Crockett's angry voice, explaining this tragedy. "See? There's his handcuffs

A TALL TEXAS TALE

MODERN METHUSELAHS

WHEN I lived at Zulch, Texas, we used to have reunions at which the older men would get together and brag about their ages. I recollect listening to Grandpa Lillypop and Uncle Billie Meyerhauffen hit it off once. Grandpa, who had turned 98 the day after Labor Day, led off.

"Folks can't understand how I've lived so long and am in such perfect shape. Well, it's all due to my habits. When I was three year old I drunk a bottle of pop. It made me dizzy and I ain't touched likker ever since. I couldn't tell you the taste of tobacker because I've never tasted it. I learnt from the chickens that it was smart to go to bed at sundown and have follered their example. I've always kept a rooster outside my bedroom winder, and when it crows I'm up like a shot. I've took regular exercise—walked 18 mile every day, rain or shine. I've been careful about my diet and always got up from the table hungry. Well, that's it, boys, and you are now looking at the happy result."

Then Uncle Billie took over, "Well, it's strange, but I've drunk enough likker to float fifteen Texas counties," he said. "I started smoking at ten and ain't had a weed out of my mouth since. I never got to bed before two A.M. and only got up when I got hungry. The only exercise I ever took was acting as pallbearer for friends that took exercise. I never left the table till all the food was gone and—"

"Stop right there, Son," interrupted Grandpa. "How old are you?"

"I'll be eighty-six my next birthday," said Uncle Billie, proudly.

Grandpa measured his words as he said, "Listen, son, if you don't change your habits you'll never live to grow old."

—W. L. Hudson

where he shed 'em!"

Hatfield's mouth compressed grimly. By tomorrow the news would be all over Laplata that Sam Kile had murdered another man. A sheriff, this time.

After an interminable discussion, Hatfield saw the party carrying Paul Deevers' death-stiffened body out to the road, loading it jackknife fashion over one of the horses. Then, following considerable low-voiced discussion, the group broke up. The visitors from Detroit headed on toward the Spanish Queen, two of them riding double, while Aaron Crockett headed back to town, trailing the horse carrying the sheriff's body.

It occurred to Hatfield that he had no business tarrying in this locality, on foot, weakened by hunger, and after exposure to the day-long heat. Not when a girl outlaw and her gun-toting *compañeros* were still in the vicinity, waiting for Crockett's men to clear out.

They would be certain to ride back into the valley to investigate. Undoubtedly they had seen and heard all that Hatfield had. They would know of the sheriff's death now, and would assume that Deevers' prisoner was either still in the rocks or was on his way out afoot.

Skirting the hillslope, careful to keep under the skyline, Hatfield was working his way into the rough country this side of Laplata when a horse whickered to him out of the night.

"Goldy!"

Bit rings jangled and the next moment Hatfield's sorrel stallion was trotting out of a cutbanked defile ahead. Then Goldy was nuzzling his shoulder in reunion.

Back in saddle, after a quick examination had located the shallow bruise of a spent bullet on Goldy's withers, Jim Hatfield had his moment of indecision. Should he clear out of this dangerous country, or risk going back to pick up the man he had gunwhipped, the masked outlaw who had called him "Chipman"?

IT SUDDENLY dawned on Hatfield that he would be overlooking a priceless opportunity to get to the bottom of Sam Kile's disappearance if he let caution overrule him now. Whoever that unconscious man was, he was linked with Paul Deevers' killing today. As was the outlaw Hatfield had killed, the man probably named Chipman. That man's body would be valuable evidence to show to the Laplata coroner tonight.

Spurring down to the wagon road, Hatfield headed back into the valley. He saw the tracks in the sage clumps where Deevers' spooked team had dragged the buckboard. A gleam of moonlight on metal made him follow those tracks a short distance, to the spot where the buckboard had tangled a wheel in a split rock, smashing the spokes. The glinting metal proved to be Hatfield's missing sixgun, which in his haste to get Deevers under cover he had left in the buckboard.

Recovering the mate to his .45, Hatfield headed on down the wagon road, keeping Goldy at a foxtrot. His eyes were studying the moonlight expanse ahead, his ears keening the night for any sound that might indicate the return of the yellow-shirted girl and her bushwhack crew.

Astride Goldy, he could outrun any outlaw pony that might be put in pursuit of him. But he had to capture that gunwhipped outlaw alive, at all costs.

Minutes later Hatfield was turning off the road opposite the lava rock outcrop, steering for the bubble-pitted lone boulder where he had bullet-dropped Chipman. Rounding the boulder, Hatfield stared at the ground. A pool of blood had made a dark stain on the sand there, verifying that this was where the dead outlaw had lain. He reined around, spurring quickly to the buckthorn thicket where he had gunwhipped the other outlaw. He was not surprised to find only a jumble of spike-heeled boot prints.

Disappointment put its crushing impact on Jim Hatfield when he saw fresh hoof prints here. They were proof that the unconscious man had been picked up by his *compadres* during the hour it had taken Hatfield to reach Goldy.

Gone was his chance of capturing a known outlaw alive, and perhaps getting

the key to the riddle of Sam Kile's disappearance. And with it went his chance of cracking the mystery of Spanish Queen's high-grading activities, his secondary consideration now.

The girl in the yellow shirt—Hatfield found himself mentally tagging her with the name, Joanne Weaver—had come back into this valley to recover her dead and to haul the knocked-out man to safety.

After riding a few circles in the roundabout vicinity to make sure the man he had gun-whipped had not dragged himself away, Hatfield spurred Goldy back to the mining road and headed toward Laplata.

He desperately needed food and rest and medical attention for his wounded arm. He also had to see the Laplata coroner, who by now would have Sheriff Deevers' remains laid out on a slab.

This first day's investigation of the Sam Kile case had drawn a zero. No, not quite a zero. For his encounter with Aaron Crockett this morning had convinced him that the Spanish Queen's superintendent was somehow mixed up in this complicated mystery.

He found his thoughts returning again and again to Crockett's stepdaughter. Remembering the fresh loveliness of Joanne Weaver, remembering the sheriff's dying words in defense of her, the Lone Wolf found himself all too ready to believe that Joanne had not been the ringleader of the bushwhack bunch he had escaped tonight.

But that yellow shirt and white sombrero! They were evidence too strong to be mere coincidence. Perhaps another day would bring the answer to that puzzle.

CHAPTER V

Yellow-Shirted Girl

IT WAS midnight when Jim Hatfield came once more in sight of the lights of Laplata, twinkling like jewels in the cup of the gulch. He had passed but one rider, coming in from the Spanish Queen road. Not until they were past each other had he realized that the other rider was Aaron Crockett, returning home after having left Paul Deevers' body in town.

The Ranger had been momentarily tempted to ride after the mine super and call a showdown. But he had decided against that, in his weakened condition. He had to get a meal under his belt, some sleep, and a doctor's attention for the wound in his arm. There would be another day to face Aaron Crockett.

Leaving Goldy at the stable where he had left the sorrel the night before, Hatfield got a fresh shirt from his *alforja* bags. From the night hostler on duty at the livery, he obtained directions for locating the mining camp's doctor, Cyrus Bolduan, the only practitioner in Laplata.

Dr. Bolduan's office was on the upper story of a mercantile building next door to the Bonanza Hotel. Climbing the outer stairs and opening a gable door which admitted him to a long hallway, he saw a single oil lamp burning in a wall sconce. Under it a professional shingle announced:

CY BOLDUAN, MD
Gunshot Wounds a Specialty
No Questions Asked

A wry grin touched Hatfield's lips as he knocked on the doctor's door. "No questions asked." That was tantamount to advertising Doc Bolduan's willingness to cater to the owlhoot trade.

He heard bedsprings shift, and a sleepy voice called out, "Just a minute, mister," then came the scratch of a match and the rattle of a lamp chimney.

The door unbolted then and opened to reveal a bald-headed gnome of a man, wearing an old-fashioned flannel nightshirt. He was thumbing the galluses of his pants over his shoulders as Hatfield stepped into the room.

"Gunshot case," the Ranger said drily. "Understand that's your specialty, Doc."

Bolduan grunted, leading his patient over to a doorway separating his living quarters from his office.

"Peel off the shirt and let's have a look."

Bolduan was more than a little drunk,

but from the moment he removed the bandage Paul Deevers had placed on Hatfield's arm and began palpating the flesh wound on the arm, the Lone Wolf knew this practitioner was skilled at his business.

Working swiftly and competently, Bolduan sterilized the wound, applied a healing ointment, then taped a smaller bandage in place. He did not speak a word. Treating bullet wounds in the middle of the night apparently was commonplace to the Laplata medico.

Shrugging into his clean shirt, Hatfield asked, "What's the charges, Doc?"

Bolduan shuffled back into his bedroom. "If you got the price of a bottle of rye in your jeans we'll call it square. If you're broke, rattle your hocks and let me sleep."

Hatfield dropped a ten-dollar gold piece on the doctor's bedside table. Bolduan had already stripped off his pants and was crawling under the covers.

"You happen to be the coroner, Doc?" Hatfield asked.

For the first time a glimmer of interest touched Bolduan's rheumy eyes. He propped himself on his pillow with one elbow.

"Other party to this affair is cold meat, eh?"

Hatfield's lips compressed. "I didn't say that. I asked if you were the coroner. Mining-camp doctors often hold that political job on the side. Along with undertaking."

Doc Bolduan grinned toothlessly. "So if they lose a patient or save him, they always win, huh? No, I ain't a coroner. I'm a deputy coroner, though, just like Paul Deever is a deputy sheriff. Laplata ain't a county seat, you see. That's Marfa, this being the south end of Presidio County."

Hatfield said carefully, "I know Paul Deevers."

Bolduan grunted. "You *did* know him. He's dead."

THE Ranger arched his brows in feigned surprise.

"Deevers is dead? Why, I saw him just this morning."

Bolduan settled back on his pillow. "Lots happened since morning, stranger. Deevers is now reclining on a slab over at the undertaker's on Gloryhole Street. Signed his death certificate not an hour ago."

Pretending deep shock, Hatfield whispered, "How'd it happen?"

"Gunshot wound. Right lung. Inflicted by a Texas Ranger turned renegade, name of Sam Kile." When Hatfield made no reply, Bolduan went on, "It is not my habit to pry into my client's affairs. And I'm not suspecting you're Sam Kile. Understand he had black eyes. Yours are kind of gray-green."

Not being sure how far he could trust this doctor—the shingle out in the hall hinted that Cyrus Bolduan was hardly a fit person to confide in—Hatfield said, "What kind of a man was Paul Deevers? I'm new to the camp."

Bolduan burrowed deeper under his covers.

"Devers was dead honest, but a blundering, inept fool."

Bolduan's appraisal of Paul Deevers matched Hatfield's own opinion to the last detail. He could have added that Deevers, whatever his deficiencies might have been, was dead game, gutty as they came. Paul Deevers had died well.

He had confirmed what he had already guessed—that Aaron Crockett had blamed Deevers' murder on Sam Kile, thereby putting further tarnish on the star Kile proudly wore. There was nothing more to be gained here.

Hatfield said, "Thank you, Doc—and if you don't mind, you haven't seen me."

Bolduan turned his head to the wall and yawned. "I am not a man to gossip about my clientele, stranger. *'Noches.*"

Leaving the building, Hatfield dropped in at an all night restaurant catering to miners off the late shifts. He got on the outside of a big meal, then returned to the Bonanza Hotel. He was given the same room. . . .

Sunlight spearing in through the open window aroused Jim Hatfield. He was astonished to discover that it was mid-after-

noon. But the long sleep had been worth it. He felt himself again, ready to tackle whatever lay ahead.

The first person Hatfield saw on the street when he emerged from the restaurant an hour later was Joanne Weaver. The girl had just ridden into town from the Spanish Queen road and was tying up in front of the mercantile store where Doc Bolduan had his office.

"Wait 'til the folks back in town sees that their sheriff has finally caught old Slippery Pete, himself!"

Watching the yellow-shirted girl climb the porch steps, Hatfield fell prey to fresh doubts about Crockett's stepdaughter. She walked with a reaching, mannish stride to go with her whipcord breeches and spurred cavalry boots. She was similar in build to the girl who had led the ambushers at shoot-out on the Spanish Queen road yesterday. But he had seen the girl leader of the outlaws only at a considerable distance. He could not be certain that she and Joanne Weaver were one and the same, despite the yellow shirt and white Stetson.

Then Hatfield noticed something which had escaped his attention yesterday. The name of the store Joanne had just entered was Chipman's Trading Post.

Hatfield thought, Chipman, I think that's the hombre I put a slug through.

Well, it would be easy enough to find out, if the proprietor of the Trading Post had turned up missing today. Hatfield made his way over to the mercantile building and sat down on a knife-whittled bench beside a peg-legged oldster who was fanning himself with a smoke-blackened hat.

Taking out the makings, Hatfield twisted himself a smoke. He offered his Durham sack and papers to the one-legged man, who only commented meagerly, "I chaw."

After the Ranger had lighted his cigarette, he asked casually, "Chipman in the store?"

The old man shrugged. "Reckon so. That's him you hear talking to the Weaver girl."

HATFIELD concealed his surprise. So the mercantile owner wasn't the man he had killed over west of the hills, then. He had drawn the wrong conclusion from the question, "That you, Chipman?" which the other outlaw had whispered in the darkness, just before Hatfield had clubbed him senseless with his gun muzzle.

"Chipman," Hatfield drawled. "He the only Chipman in these diggings? Wondering where I've heard the name before."

His informant laughed. "You'd heard the name Chipman, all right, if you'd been around Laplata for long. It was him made the big discovery strike at the Spanish Queen back in Seventy-nine. Lazarus Chipman."

Hatfield turned to face the old man with freshening interest.

"Chipman owns the Spanish Queen Mine? The one Crockett runs?"

The oldster grunted. "I said he discov-

ered the strike. If'n he'd held onto it, Laz would be a millionaire today. But he didn't. Sold out to an Eastern combine for a song. The Spanish Queen syndicate drove the shaft, imported the machinery, built the smelter down-canyon a ways."

Hatfield shook his head sympathetically. "That's the way it goes. Prospector who makes the find don't cash in on the pay dirt."

After a pause the one-legged man volunteered further information. "Yeah. Now Chipman runs this greasy-blanket trading post. Couldn't even get the job of super out at the Spanish Queen. That went to a tenderfoot name of Crockett. That's his gal in there now—Joanne Weaver. His stepdaughter."

Taking a shot in the dark, Hatfield said, "Understand high-graders are plaguing the Spanish Queen."

The old-timer nodded. "Robbing the diggings blind. That's why a batch of back East bankers and visitors are paying a visit to the Queen this week. High-graders is bankrupting the syndicate—and Crockett can't find the leak to save his soul."

With a laugh, Hatfield prodded his informant again. "Why don't he call in the Texas Rangers?"

The old man fingered his beard thoughtfully. "Did. Imported a Ranger name of Sam Kile. But he turned stage robber. Matter of fact, this Ranger shot and killed our deppity sheriff yesterday. You *must* be new around the camp, stranger, not to know that. They're buryin' Deevers in boot hill *mañana*."

Hatfield was saying, "I'm just drifting through," when the store door further along the porch opened and Joanne Weaver came out. With her was a stocky man of fifty-odd who wore a green celluloid eyeshade and a grimy canvas apron.

"Much obliged for the comissary order, Joanne," the man said. "Tell your pa I'll haul the stuff out bright and early tomorrow morning. Can't let your syndicate muckers go hungry."

Heading down the steps toward the hitch-rack, Joanne Weaver called back to the man in the doorway:

"Why, Laz, it's the least the Spanish Queen could do, giving you our provision business. After all, you discovered the mine."

Hatfield lowered his head, elbows on knees, not wanting the girl to recognize him as she ducked under the tie-bar and stepped into stirrups. She was riding the snow-white *blanco* he had seen yesterday morning.

Yesterday Hatfield had been wearing a faded blue hickory shirt. Last night in Doc Bolduan's office he had changed to a cotton shirt with a red and white plaid design. But even so, Joanne Weaver might spot him as the man her father declared was the renegade Ranger, Sam Kile.

Under the brim of his stetson, Hatfield sized up the storekeeper in the doorway —Lazarus Chipman. Had he been one of last night's ambush riders? Had Joanne Weaver dropped into the Trading Post to discuss their abortive siege, under the guise of ordering supplies for Crockett's comissary?

CHIPMAN vanished inside the store. Hatfield, watching Joanne Weaver canter off, the sun bright on her lemon-yellow shirt, was about to turn back to his companion when a blur of bright color drew his eye across the street.

The Ranger's jaw sagged open in amazement at what he saw. A girl who might have been Joanne Weaver's twin was just emerging from the postoffice, sorting through a handful of mail. A girl wearing a lemon-yellow silk shirt and snow-white stetson, identical to Joanne's!

"Hey!" Hatfield blurted to the old man beside him as the girl crossed the street toward them. "Do all girls in Laplata dress alike?"

The old man chuckled. "This close to the Fourth of July, you'll see a lot of gals dressed like that, stranger. Call themselves the Yellow Jackettes."

"Yellow Jackettes?"

"Yeah. Mounted drill team. Twirl ropes, prance their horses like circus performers. Twenty of 'em. They're putting Laplata on

the map, them gals. You ought to see 'em at San Jacinto Day festival over in San Antone, parading and strutting!"

CHAPTER VI

"I'm Sam Kile!"

CONFUSION, tinged with relief, stormed through the Ranger as he watched Joanne Weaver's "twin" crossing the board walk in front of Chipman's store. This girl was a honey blonde, thanks to a brassy bleach job. And according to this gossipy old man she had eighteen counterparts here in Laplata.

Hatfield told himself, Why, she could have been the one who led those bushwhackers yesterday. The sheriff was dead right about Joanne Weaver.

Aloud, he said to the old man at his side, "Who's this girl? She's a prime looking filly."

The oldster whinnied with mirth.

"Her? Names Adele Trollon. Surprised she ain't wearing black this mornin'."

"Why black? That yellow get-up looks mighty nice."

Adele Trollon was coming up the porch steps now, intent on a letter she was reading.

The one-legged man said, in a half-whisper, "Her old man got bushwhacked out on the Spanish Queen road last night. Prospector packed his carcass in—found it lying alongside the road, cold stiff. Talk is this Sam Kile feller done it, seeing's how it was the same stretch of road where the sheriff was killed yesterday."

Hatfield's heart slugged his ribs. Adele Trollon's father, then, was the man Hatfield had dropped behind the lava boulder last night, the outlaw whose fellows had made off with his body. Or perhaps gossip was right, and a passing desert rat *had* come across the dead man and brought in the man Trollon.

Before Hatfield could speak, the old man got up off the bench and called in a creaky voice, "Adele, come over here! Reckon you're always interested in meeting a handsome young walloper like this 'un, ain't you?"

Even as Adele looked up from her letter, Hatfield realized what was happening. This garrulous old man was taking it upon himself to introduce him to this girl!

Adele's eyes showed a roused interest as she sized up the tall stranger who was coming to his feet alongside the one-legged gaffer. Seeing her at close range, Hatfield sized up Adele Trollon as a dance-hall type. Her face was over-rouged, her lips over-painted, and with a slack, dissolute cast.

There was a predatory boldness in her manner as she came toward Hatfield, swinging her hips provocatively, like a honkytonk jezebel.

"Always glad to meet a good-looker, Pop," she said, turning a spuriously dazzling smile on the tall Ranger. She held out a slim, sun-bronzed hand. Pleased to meetcha, Mr.—"

"Hayes. Jim Hayes."

"I'm Adele Trollon, Mr. Hayes. Cowpoke, ain't you? Going to be around town long?"

"Just drifting through, ma'am."

Adele cocked her head saucily. "I work at the Fashion Casino. Why don't you drop in some night and try your luck?"

Hatfield said, "Well, ma'am, I—"

And then the old man cut in, "I wasn't sure if you'd be dancing tonight, so soon after Sam Kile bushwhacked your pa, Adele."

The girl's manner changed. "Sam Kile will be stretching a hangrope before the music starts tonight, Pop."

Pop jerked erect. "You mean they've dabbed their loop on that fake Ranger? When? I hadn't heerd about it."

Adele Trollon jerked her head in the direction of Chipman's door. "Laz Chipman knows where Kile is hanging out. Just a matter of waiting for a new deputy to get to town to take Paul Deevers' place, and Sam Kile will be at the end of his murderin' spree. New deputy'll be in this evening on the Marfa stage."

Hatfield's pulses pounded. The girl spoke with a surety which convinced him that Laz Chipman believed he knew where the vanished Ranger was hiding out. Yet, at the moment, Hatfield dared not show any outward interest. He was supposed to be a saddle bum, riding through town, unfamiliar with affairs in Laplata.

Adele linked her arm through Hatfield's. "Let me show you the town, cowboy," she said throatily. "I got to step into the store for a few groceries. Maybe you could carry 'em over to my shanty for me, huh?"

HATFIELD swung a glance at old Pop. The one-legged gaffer winked broadly. "I got a hunch, Hayes," he chuckled, "You'll be hanging around town a spell. Ain't every stranger Adele takes a liking to. You're lucky and don't realize it."

Adele Trollon was ushering Hatfield to the door of Chipman's store. He stammered, "I—uh—will be glad to tote your groceries for you, ma'am. But sizing up the town—I got to be drifting."

The girl squeezed his arm. It was the bullet-punctured arm and the pressure brought an involuntary grimace to the Ranger's face. Shoving open the door, Hatfield and Adele stepped into the semi-darkness of the Trading Post. Just inside the entrance, Lazarus Chipman was busy with a hatchet, knocking the head off a fresh cracker barrel.

"Laz," Adele Trollon said, letting go Hatfield's arm, "I got a customer for you. Ranger Jim Hatfield, no less."

Pure shock ran through Hatfield. He saw Chipman straighten up, eyes flicking from the girl to him. Then something hard prodded Hatfield in the short ribs and he glanced down. Adele was pressing the stubby barrel of a .41 derringer against his side.

"Stand hitched, Ranger!" Her voice was as lethal as a sidewinder's hiss now. "Out on the porch there I told you Laz Chipman knew where Sam Kile was hiding out. We're taking you to him."

Chipman dropped his hatchet, reached under his store apron and produced a long-barreled Remington .44. In Hatfield's mind was but one thought. He had blundered into a trap here, and was at the mercy of this girl with the derringer. She was all the more dangerous because she knew he had killed her father. There was no further doubt in Hatfield's mind. Adele Trollon had been the yellow-shirted leader of the bushwhackers.

Moving in behind his leveled Remington, Lazarus Chipman reached for Hatfield's guns, tossing them behind a rack of buggy whips to one side of the door. Then he backed away, gesturing for Hatfield to follow.

"Come on," Chipman snarled. "Got to get you out of sight before somebody drifts in."

The pressure of Adele's single-shot pistol in his spine warned Hatfield that resistance would be suicidal. This girl was a cool one. Out on the porch, when the peg-leg had introduced her to Hatfield, she must have known who he was. Yet she had given no sign.

They were heading down an alley between counters, toward a room in the rear of the Trading Post. Was Sam Kile waiting back there? The rookie Ranger Hatfield had called friend, the vanished lawman turned bullion robber? He would soon find out now if Sam Kile was a traitor, or a martyr.

Entering the room which was Chipman's living quarters, Hatfield saw a man playing solitaire at a table. He was not Sam Kile. He was a raw-boned man whose head was girdled with a blood-stained turban of bandage. And instantly Hatfield knew who he was. Here was the hombre Hatfield himself had gun-whipped on the mining road last night. The man who had whispered, "That you, Chipman?" when they had unexpectedly come face to face behind the buckthorn brush.

Was he the outlaw who was masquerading as Sam Kile?

"Curly"— Lazarus Chipman chuckled— "here's the Ranger who sneaked out of

our gun trap last night. The Lone Wolf hisself, Adele dabbed her loop on him just now, right in my store!"

The card player came to his feet, exposing crooked, yellow teeth in a grin. He fumbled in his shirt pocket and took out a shiny metal object.

"Always glad to meet a fellow Ranger, Hatfield," the man called Curly said elaborately. "I'm Sam Kile. Here's my badge. Want to see my papers?"

As he spoke, Curly dropped the metal object on the card-littered table. It was a circle-enclosed silver star engraved with the words "Texas Ranger." The number was 316.

SAM Kile's number. Sam Kile's badge. The badge Hatfield had pinned so proudly on his young rookie friend, up at Menard Barracks a year ago. Here was proof of Kile's honor, that he had lived up to his oath. Here was vindication of Hatfield's faith in his protégé.

In a voice shaking with scorn, Hatfield bit out, "You're not Sam Kile, you cheap yellow-bellied skunk. You're the damned crook who's been holding up those bullion shipments of Wells Fargo's."

Curly returned the stolen badge to his pocket. He spread his grimy hands in mock contrition.

"*Sta nada*—so I ain't really Sam Kile. Curly Mustane is the brand, if you must know. Lately of Arizona Territory. Imported to do a job picking up bar silver . . . Kile was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

Mustane's use of the past tense told Hatfield what instinctively he already knew. Sam Kile was dead. He had to be. Otherwise this leering imposter could not have gained possession of his badge and papers.

"Kile was my friend, yes," Hatfield said.

Mustane's grin widened. "Then I'll do you a favor. We'll bury you alongside Kile—in the deepest grave in Texas. A grave nine hundred feet deep. Shaft Two over at the Spanish Queen!"

CHAPTER VII

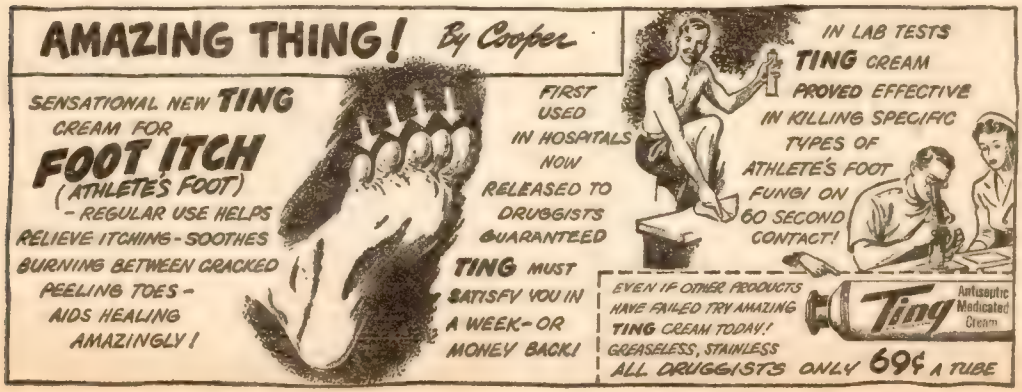
At the Spanish Queen

JIM HATFIELD lay bound and gagged on the cot in Lazarus Chipman's back room, watching Curly Mustane and Adele Trollon play cribbage. Obviously they were waiting for darkness before moving their prisoner out of town; and darkness was not far off.

The outlaw pair had been playing cards by lamplight for better than an hour now. It had been four hours since Adele had pulled her derringer on the Lone Wolf.

He had long since given up trying to loosen the rawhide thongs with which Mustane had trussed his arms behind his back and his legs at knee and ankle. The

[*Turn page*]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gag was a preventive measure, to make sure their prisoner did not shout and draw attention from customers in the store.

Chipman had been kept busy in the store ever since he had helped Mustane tie up Hatfield. The Ranger had hoped that Mustane and the girl might converse freely in his hearing, dropping some hint as to what had happened to Sam Kile; or might even refer to the high-grading at Spanish Queen.

But Mustane and Adele let the hours pass in dead silence, concentrating on their game. From time to time the girl put her basilisk gaze on Hatfield, pure hatred shining in her eyes. Tonight would bring her vengeance for the death of her father at the hands of this Ranger.

Mustane had said Sam Kile was buried at the bottom of one of the Spanish Queen's shafts. Knowing how mines operated, the Ranger knew that meant that the foreman in charge of the elevator must be one of the high-graders responsible for Sam's murder.

Kile had descended into the depths of the Spanish Queen Mine, his name had been ticked off on the hoist man's roster of the shift. Kile had not returned above ground. The elevator operator must have known that, and told Aaron Crockett the name of the missing miner. The fact that Crockett apparently had made no report to Sheriff Deevers was convincing proof, in Hatfield's opinion, that the superintendent was tied in with the very high-grading operations he had summoned a Texas Ranger to investigate.

Wagon wheels rumbled in the rear of the Trading Post and Hatfield heard booted feet climb the back steps. A door opened, and Chipman stepped into the glare of lamplight where his confederates were playing cards.

"Commissary wagon's loaded for the Queen," Chipman announced. "Won't be any questions asked about taking the wagon out tonight instead of tomorrow like I promised Joanne I would."

Curly Mustane and Adele Trollon tossed their cribbage hands aside and stood up. The girl came over to Hatfield's side, staring down at him.

"This is the last time I'll be laying eyes on you, Hatfield," she said venomously. "That was my father you shot yesterday. I hope they bury you alive."

She turned away as Mustane reached down to seize the front of Hatfield's shirt and lift the Ranger to a sitting position. Chipman called out from the open doorway:

"Adele, you're too busted up to report for work at the Fashion tonight. Get yourself a bottle of red-eye and go to bed."

Adele shrugged, shot a final look at Hatfield, and vanished inside the store.

Hatfield made inarticulate sounds behind his bandana gag as Chipman and Mustane seized him by the armpits and hauled him out into a pit-black alley behind the Trading Post.

Starshine revealed a massive-wheeled Pittsburgh wagon, hitched to a six-mule team, backed up to the loading ramp of the storage room. The end-gate was down and the box of the big freighter was loaded with assorted merchandise consigned to the Spanish Queen Mine.

Hauling Hatfield bodily into the wagon, the two outlaws stretched their prisoner out on a section of floor space between packing cases, barrels and kegs.

THEN the end-gate was lifted and chained in place and the canvas tarpaulin that covered the Pittsburgh in lieu of its original bowed canopy, was let down, plunging Hatfield into total darkness.

He heard the two men mount to the driver's seat, heard Chipman's profane comment to the mules. A whip popped and the freight wagon lurched into motion, wheeling around toward Main Street.

Through cracks in the end-gate Hatfield saw lighted windows along the street flit past as Chipman swung his team west toward the Spanish Queen road. Muffled sounds reached Hatfield above the rumble of iron-shod wheels.

Finding any attempt to free himself

of his bonds useless, he decided to conserve his strength for any lastminute stand he might be able to make, once the Spanish Queen was reached.

He directed his thoughts to Curly Mustane, riding up front with Lazarus Chipman. Mustane, the man who had impersonated Texas Ranger Sam Kile. "Imported to do a job" from Arizona Territory—Mustane's own words. Who had imported him, and for what job? To hold up Wells Fargo stages hauling Spanish Queen bullion to the outside world?

Again the finger of suspicion seemed to point to Aaron Crockett. As mine superintendent, Crockett would know when bullion was turned over to the express company. When it would be shipped was something Crockett would have no way of knowing, for Wells Fargo took over that responsibility, not the mine syndicate.

That was where the fake Sam Kile had entered the picture, in the person of Curly Mustane. Obviously no regular employee of the Spanish Queen would have dared try to pass himself off as a Texas Ranger, using Sam Kile's badge and personal credentials. That had to be done by a stranger to Laplata. A man like Mustane, imported for the purpose from far-off Arizona.

Hatfield had no way of keeping track of passing time or distance. He knew though, that they were nearing the Spanish Queen diggings when the road angled upward and the mules slowed their pace.

Then, an eternity after leaving Laplata, the Pittsburgh ground to a halt and Hatfield heard a voice challenge the driver.

"Chipman, hauling in supplies!" the storekeeper answered the invisible gatekeeper at the outskirts of the Spanish Queen.

Hatfield heard a chain rattle, then the creak of an opening gate. Chipman's whip popped like a pistol shot. The freighter lurched forward, entering the fenced-in area.

After several twistings and turnings, apparently on crude streets between tailing dumps and shafthouses, Chipman halted the mules. Then he started them again, to back the wagon until it struck a platform with a heavy thump.

HATFIELD heard the two men climb down off the wagon. Chipman said to someone—a night watchman, most likely, "We're bunking overnight, helper and myself, Fosburg. Unload in the morning."

The glimmer of the nightwatchman's light moved on. Hatfield could hear Mustane and Chipman unharnessing the mules and leading them away.

There followed for the Lone Wolf an interminable wait. During the trip out from town the barrels and boxes of merchandise had shifted, pinning him in a cramped position between them. He was

A TALL TEXAS TALE

THOSE TOUGH TEXANS

HAVING dilated at some length on the geographical extent and charms of the Lone Star State, a talkative Texan finally got around to a little modest bragging on the toughness of Texas cowboys.

"Only way to kill one," he said, "is cut off his head and hide it! I've known ol' *Tejano* buckaroos to get bit by six rattlesnakes in one day and never bat an eye. I saw one get both legs cut off by a freight train and never even faint. Fact is, the only time I ever heard of a Texan fainting was one time when one of 'em heard a lady tourist remark that she'd always thought Texas was just a county in Oklahoma. Such ignorance naturally shocked him so bad that he fainted dead away and it was fourteen hours before we could bring him to!"

"Indeed!" commented a non-Texan listener. "Why didn't somebody slosh a bucket of sand in his face?"

—*S. Omar Baker*

unable even to kick his boot heels against the end-gate, so as to attract the attention of anyone passing.

Finally, after what seemed endless hours of waiting, Hatfield heard boots crunching on rubble outside, then a rattle of chains as the Pittsburgh's end-gate was opened.

Rough hands seized Hatfield's boots. A man climbed into the wagon to move boxes to free their prisoner, then the Ranger was being hauled to his feet on a plank platform flanking a tarpaper-roofed warehouse.

He looked around, almost too weak to stand. Two men were with him; one of them was Mustane, the other a bearded man in miner's clothes. Chipman was nowhere in the vicinity. He probably was snoring peacefully in the syndicate bunkhouse after having ostensibly come to the Spanish Queen with a load of commissary supplies.

Alongside the warehouse was the towering structure of a shafthouse, surmounted by a huge tipple hoist. Hatfield remembered having seen it from the valley the day before. From the position of the moon in the Texas sky he judged it now was after midnight.

Without speaking, Mustane crouched down and severed Hatfield's leg bonds with a hunting knife.

"Easier to walk you than drag you," Mustane whispered. "All right, Fosburg. Where do we go now?"

The miner grunted, gripping Hatfield's wounded arm with viselike pressure. Only the gag prevented the Ranger from crying out in pain.

"This way. Number Three Shafthouse. Two's been boarded up ever since the veins petered out three years back."

They rounded the corner of the adjacent shafthouse. Moonlight revealed a sign high atop the tower:

SPANISH QUEEN #2

Obviously this was an abandoned shaft. The hoisting machinery had been partially dismantled, the door was padlocked, and the windows broken or boarded up.

A chill coasted down Hatfield's spine, remembering Mustane's threat back in Laplata—"We'll bury you in the deepest grave in Texas. Shaft Number Two at the Spanish Queen!"

This shaft house they were now leaving behind them, then, was Sam Kile's tombstone. Nine hundred feet below, the young Ranger's bones lay in their secret grave, his fate a mystery which probably would never be solved. And Mustane had promised Hatfield the same grave.

The miner was leading them toward another shafthouse a hundred yards north of Number Two. The way led past a long, dark-windowed bunkhouse and a yard piled high with rusting machinery. They skirted a powerhouse with a high smoking chimney, a wood yard, and what appeared to be a livery barn.

Then Fosberg approached a high board fence, produced a ring of keys and unlocked a door admitting them to the area around Shafthouse Number Three.

They were heading toward the shafthouse door when a clattering behind them made Fosberg and Mustane halt, keening the night suspiciously.

"The other nightwatchman on his rounds," Fosburg whispered. "No need to worry. Nobody'd be following us. This shaft is on my circuit."

Fosberg, then, was a nightwatchman for the Spanish Queen.

WAITING while Fosberg trundled back the sliding door of Number Three, Mustane said nervously, "Won't the elevator machinery make a racket, lowering us?"

Fosberg grunted, ducking into the blackness of the great building.

"No matter. Shafts Five and Six are running full blast, hauling up ore every hour or so. One elevator windlass sounds like another."

Fosberg led the way through Stygian blackness. Then he struck a match, to reveal the boxlike cage of a mine elevator, suspended by steel cables from the tower overhead.

The night watchman had difficulty shoving open the sliding door of the cage and Mustane, keeping one hand on Hatfield's arm, moved over to put his shoulder against the door.

The Ranger glanced around wildly, trying to locate the door. With his legs free, he might be able to make a break for it. But the brief glow of Fosberg's match had told him that the building was a maze of timbers and machinery.

In that instant, Hatfield caught sight of a shadowy figure moving through the open door of the shafthouse, from the outer yard. For a moment he thought it might be Chipman, coming to witness Hatfield's end. But he heard no further sound of footsteps or an identifying voice.

Yet someone had followed them in here—

"All right," muttered the night watchman. "You ride herd on this Ranger, Curly. I'll handle the levers and such."

The opportunity to bolt was gone. Mustane was shoving Hatfield onto the steel floor of the elevator cage. Fosberg stepped inside, sliding the barred door shut behind him. He was fumbling in the darkness for the brake lever and starting throttle which actuated the hoist.

A steam cock hissed and chains rattled. Then a big cable drum began whirring and the floor seemed to drop out from under Hatfield's boot soles as the cage began its vertical drop into the bowels of the earth.

An instant before the ground level shut off his view of the starlighted doorway, Hatfield thought he saw a dim shape reach the edge of the mine shaft. His ears caught a distinct thud as something landed on the wooden roof of the cage. Then his ears were filled with the rumble of the cage lowering at a high rate of speed into blackness.

Fosberg struck another match, this time lighting a miner's bull's-eye lantern. Its yellow glare revealed the blasted rock blurring past, the black openings of side drifts and cross-cut tunnels, rock-stoppered waste dumps which had once been ore-bearing stopes, winzes and shoring timbers.

Air pressure squeezed against Hatfield's ear-drums. Fosberg swung a lever, slowing the rate of descent, and Hatfield saw a sign board vault upwards outside the cage:

650 FEET

"How come Number Three Shaft ain't working?" Mustane broke the silence to ask. The man who had impersonated Sam Kile was sweating profusely. Obviously being this far underground gave him a bad case of claustrophobia.

"It's petering out," Fosberg explained, hand clutching throttle and brake levers. "Same as Five and Six. Spanish Queen's seen her best days, Curly. This time a year from now half the crew will be laid off and we'll be working low-grade stuff. This high-grading picnic is about over."

Fosberg, obviously an expert at the hoisting machinery controls, brought the elevator cage to a feather-soft landing on the wooden bumpers at shaft's bottom. Facing the elevator door was a crosscut opening, a tunnel high enough for a man to walk upright, blasted through the rock to tap an ore body. A sign was lettered on an overhead shoring timber:

700 FEET

"Number Three's a couple hundred feet shallower than Two," Fosberg explained. "Come on."

OPENING the cage door, the night-watchman headed out into the 700-foot tunnel, with Mustane following, holding a tight grip on Hatfield as if he feared his prisoner might attempt a getaway in the pitchblack catacombs that once was a mine. Their boots crunched on rubble as they walked along between midget railroad tracks, used for transporting ore to the hoist car.

The tunnel ended in a dead end less than two hundred paces from the elevator shaft. Hatfield, remembering the distance between shafthouses above ground, estimated that they were only halfway to Shaft Two. The cul-de-sac was empty

save for a string of rusty iron ore cars, hitched in tandem on the miniature track.

"Where do we go from here?" Mustane inquired nervously. "I don't like being so far from daylight. Feel like a damn gopher."

Fosberg grinned. "It's cost the lives of two Texas Rangers, counting Hatfield here, to find out where we go from here, Curly. According to Crockett's map of the Spanish Queen, we got a hundred and fifty feet of solid rock between us and Number Two." The nightwatchman snickered. "Maps can be wrong, though."

Mustane watched curiously as Fosberg hung the bull's-eye on an overhead spike, then hunkered down to paw with both hands in a litter of tailing rubble. In a few moments he had uncovered a massive wrench with a handle nearly three feet long, a steam-fitter's tool which obviously had been buried here for a purpose.

Fosberg soon demonstrated what that purpose was.

Jim Hatfield was leaning for support against the rusty iron rim of an ore cart. Mustane had released him but was standing further back, taking no chances of his prisoner attempting a sudden break.

The metal edge of the ore cart had rusted away, its roughness biting into the flesh of the Ranger's arm. That knife-like touch gave him the glimmerings of an idea.

Mustane's attention was on what Fosberg was doing. The Spanish Queen night watchman was busy unscrewing a massive nut from a bolt which apparently connected two shoring timbers together. Shifting position, Hatfield put the rawhide thongs against the sharp, rusty edge of the ore cart's rim. His back was in shadow and Curly Mustane's whole attention was on Fosberg. The outlaw was not aware of the sawing motions of Hatfield's arms, rubbing the tough leather strings over the rusty iron car rim.

Removing the nut from the bolt, Fosberg laid it aside and tapped the exposed bolt with the wrench. It vanished into the timber. At once Fosberg was using the wrench handle as a pry between the rock wall and the huge wooden pillar.

Hatfield felt a rawhide thong come asunder against his wrist. He felt the tingle when the blood coursed back into his numbed hands as the intolerable constriction eased up.

A wild surge of hope went through the Ranger. He had only to jerk his arms apart and he would be free!

"A trap-door, by thunder!"

Mustane's exclamation was timed with what Fosberg was doing. The big shoring timber—a dummy, Hatfield now realized—was swiveling outward like a door on invisible pivots in floor and ceiling. Exposed behind the wooden barrier was a black aperture in the rock wall of the tunnel, barely wide enough for a man to squeeze through.

"All right, Curly!" Fosberg panted. "There's the tunnel leading to the seven-hundred foot level over at Shaft Two. That's the way you'll get your Ranger amigo to his grave!"

CHAPTER VIII

Deepest Grave in Texas

RANGER Hatfield knew that in these cramped quarters between the side tunnel and the ore carts, he would be at a disadvantage if he broke his frayed wrist bonds now. To do so prematurely could be disastrous. Circulation was not sufficiently restored for him to have any real control over his muscles. His bid for escape must come later.

Fosberg handed the bull's-eye lantern to Mustane.

"You go ahead," he said, "and I'll follow with Hatfield."

Mustane squeezed himself into the narrow tunnel mouth and disappeared. In darkness, Hatfield felt the night watchman shoving him toward the opening.

"Go ahead, Hatfield—you can make it," Fosberg grumbled. "This is where we

shoved Sam Kile, when he came to spy on the high-grading. And Kile was as big a man as you are."

Hatfield turned sideways, careful to keep his wrists together behind his back, giving the appearance that he was still helpless to move his arms.

It was tight going in this tunnel, but a dozen feet further on it widened out into a space three feet wide by four feet high. Mustane, crouched in the offing, was swinging the beam of the lantern toward him.

"All right—lead off," Fosberg ordered, squeezing out of the bottleneck behind Hatfield. "This tunnel goes straight as an arrow to Number Two Shaft, Curly. But the bottom of Number Two is a couple hundred feet deeper than this tunnel, so take it easy when you see a wooden barricade ahead."

Hatfield was glad the lead man was carrying the lantern. Its rays threw his own body into silhouette, making it impossible for the night watchman to see the dangling end of the rawhide thong which had girdled the Ranger's wrists.

They stumbled on, bent almost double to avoid striking their heads on the jagged tunnel roof. This cavity had been bored through solid rock at incredible cost of manpower, and Fosberg had said its existence was not noted on the syndicate's blueprints of its underground diggings.

The significance of that secrecy came to Hatfield now. This tunnel was in some way connected with the high-grading piracy which threatened the Spanish Queen with bankruptcy. There could be no other justification for the labor which had gone into its drilling.

Carrying his reasoning still further, the Lone Wolf arrived at another logical conclusion. If this secret tunnel joined Number Two and Three Shafts, then perhaps it was the artery through which the stolen ore was transported.

Number Two had been abandoned—but what if there still was an ore hoist in operating condition? Outlaw miners assembling high-grade in Shaft Three could bring it to the surface at Number Two, a shaft supposed to be out of commission.

A hundred feet further on, Hatfield had further verification that his hunch was correct. Here the secret tunnel joined a barnlike stope, obviously a part of Shaft Two's workings when that branch of the Spanish Queen had been a paying proposition.

Now the entrance to this stope had been boarded over and was no doubt listed on the syndicate's records as an abandoned stope. But it was being used for storage purposes, nevertheless. The rays of Mustane's lantern revealed tier upon tier of burlap ore sacks, stuffed with mineral specimens. Hatfield would have bet his last chip that those sacks contained ore which would assay high in mineral content.

"This is it," Fosberg said, as they reached the planked-over entrance to the stope. "Number Two Shaft is on the other side of this gate, so don't get too close."

Mustane was panting heavily, like a grounded fish. He hung the lantern on a protruding nail and stood back as Fosberg proceeded to unlock a heavy padlock hanging from a massive iron hasp on the inner side of the planking.

MOTIONING for Hatfield to move back out of the way, Fosberg pulled the plank gate inward. The lantern beams revealed a vertical shaft, dropping into inky blackness. The bottom of that hole lay two hundred feet down.

"The deepest grave in Texas," Mustane chuckled, turning to Hatfield. "Right, Fosberg? I never been here before, but this looks like the place."

Fosberg grinned toothily, motioning toward the yawning pit.

"That's where we dumped Sam Kile, the dirty stool pigeon. He thought we were coming into Number Six shaft to work. His bones are down there. She's flooded, so it was a wet grave. But Texas Rangers can't be picky, can they, Hatfield?"

Curly Mustane was rubbing his big palms together, staring at Hatfield. The Ranger was standing motionless, cheeks

sweat-rinsed in the lantern shine, staring into the black void that was Sam Kile's grave, sore jaws chewing on his sodden gag.

"Let's get this over with," Fosberg snapped. "Chuck him overboard and stand by for the splash. Then we got to get back topside. I got a time clock to punch in twenty minutes. Can't risk being late on my rounds, or the front office would haul me on the carpet."

Grinning malevolently, Curly Mustane headed toward Jim Hatfield, hands extended.

AND in that moment the Lone Wolf moved like a bursting bomb! His first lunge was at Fosberg, knowing he had to get the night watchman out of the way, first of all.

Fosberg was caught by surprise. He saw Hatfield's booted foot coming up and tried to twist away, but the full force of the Ranger's kick caught him in the pit of the stomach, slamming him back against the open gate and dropping him to his knees, retching in agony.

"Feeling playful, Ranger?" Shouting, Mustane lunged at Hatfield.

And the Ranger's arms came out from behind his back, frayed ends of rawhide thongs flying free. Before Mustane was aware of that, Hatfield had seized the man by both wrists and was hauling him backward, away from the yawning edge of the mine shaft.

Off-balance, Mustane fell against Hatfield. Hatfield's knee came up with jarring impact against Mustane's ribs, knocking the wind from his lungs with a grunt of expelled air. Then Mustane was down, with Hatfield still clinging doggedly to the killer outlaw's hairy wrists.

With a bawled oath of terror, Curly Mustane jerked his right arm free of Hatfield's grasp, for full strength was not yet restored to the Ranger's muscles. Hatfield saw a glint of lamplight on up-darting gunmetal as Mustane hauled a Colt from holster, but a well-placed kick to his adversary's fist knocked the gun out onto the stope floor before Mustane could bring it level.

Releasing his grasp on Mustane's other wrist, Hatfield drove a clubbing fist to the outlaw's head, catching him on the bandaged bruise on his temple.

A yell of sheer pain escaped Mustane's lips as the big outlaw reared to his feet, swiveling to meet Hatfield's next rush.

For a moment the two men stood toe to toe, slugging in desperate, barroom-brawl style, pummeling each other with murderous lefts and rights. From the tail of his eye Hatfield had to keep part of his attention on Fosberg. The night watchman might recover at any moment and drag a gun.

Hatfield was weakening fast. His arms were still sore and stiff from their long hours of being tied behind him. He thought, I'm losing this brawl, and he danced away from Curly Mustane's flailing blows, trying to locate the gun he had kicked from the outlaw's hand.

The same idea occurred to Mustane. Pulling back, he looked around, searching for the fallen Colt. Then he spotted it, a couple of yards to Hatfield's right.

Mustane made his leap for the gun, his defenses down, his mind momentarily off his opponent. And in that instant Jim Hatfield landed a haymaker to Mustane's jaw with the last ounce of his flagging power behind the blow.

KNUCKLES connected with sickening impact on Mustane's chin. The force of that sledging blow halted the outlaw's forward rush, snapped his head back, started his arms windmilling for balance.

For this brief instant, the advantage was Hatfield's, although his all-out Sunday punch hadn't been enough to drop his heavier opponent. It could have knocked out the average man.

Before Mustane could recover himself, the Lone Wolf drove a following uppercut to the jaw.

From beside the shaft gate, Fosberg saw Mustane reel backward before the dynamite punch. The night watchman yelled in horror as he saw Mustane's boot

heels hit the wooden planking at the shaft's brink.

Hatfield lunged for the teetering outlaw, wanting to capture this man alive. But he was too late. Inches from the Ranger's outstretched hands, Mustane toppled backward into empty space.

Hatfield had a momentary glimpse of Kile's impersonator doing a backward somersault into eerie blackness. Lamplight flickered off the hobbled soles of abyss, shuddering at his own narrow escape. He turned to face Fosberg. Then he froze, staring into the black bore of a .45 six-gun in the night watchman's hand.

Clinging to his throbbing belly with his left hand, Fosberg came shakily to his feet, leaning against the plank gate.

"Saved us the job of disposing of Mustane, Hatfield," panted the nightwatchman. "We hadn't figured on letting him live long, knowing what he did. . . . If

"Isn't he the sweetest thing? Look, he wants to shake hands!"

Mustane's up-ending boots. Then the killer was plummeting downward toward his doom.

The Ranger skidded to a halt at the shaft's edge, yanking off the loathsome gag. He heard Mustane's frenzied howl as the man hurtled downward into that Stygian void. Then, remotely, came a sodden splash as Mustane's body hit stagnant water two hundred feet below. No living thing could survive a dive like that.

"The deepest—grave—in Texas." Hatfield panted the words, his first speech in long hours.

Instinctively he recoiled from the black you believe in prayers, you got five ticks to say yours, Lone Wolf."

Hatfield's stomach muscles braced for the expected slam of a point-blank bullet. Fosberg was still in violent pain from the kick to the solar plexus, but his hand was rock-steady, holding that gun.

The Ranger saw Fosberg's thumb ear the knurled gun-hammer to full cock. He saw the knuckle on Fosberg's trigger finger whiten to increasing pressure.

Then the gunshot blasted like a cannon inside this rock-enclosed stope. And Jim Hatfield found himself wondering why he felt no pain, why the bullet's impetus had not slammed him into Shaft Two.

Incredibly, the sixgun dropped from Fosberg's hand. No smoke fumed from its muzzle. The hammer was still poised at full cock. The shot had not come from Fosberg's weapon!

Slowly, like a hewn tree falling, the nightwatchman pitched face-forward, his shoulder slamming Hatfield in the shins. A gout of blood came from a bullet-hole punched in Fosberg's skull. Through the right temple. The bullet had come from back inside the stope, then!

Hatfield whirled to face that direction. He saw a slight yellow-shirted figure advancing slowly from the direction of the outlet tunnel to Shaft Three, the lantern light just beginning to touch the high-crowned snow-white stetson above the yellow shirt.

He thought, So Adele will be the one to pay off for her father's killing. And then he saw that he was mistaken. The girl holding the smoking sixgun at waist level, walking slowly into the beam of the hanging lantern, was Joanne Weaver. Aaron Crockett's stepdaughter was mixed up in this grim business after all!

Hatfield did not speak as she came to a halt, staring down at Fosberg's body. Her lips moved, and her hushed whisper came to him indistinctly above the ringing in his ears from the gun's recent blast:

"I killed him! I killed old Tom Fosberg. The man who—who trotted me on his knee—when I was a baby!"

SUDDENLY overcome, Joanne dropped the fuming Colt as if it had been a live reptile.

It came to Hatfield then. She had shot Fosberg to save a Ranger's life, an instant before Fosberg would have squeezed trigger.

Time later to find out the reason behind the girl's miraculous appearance seven hundred feet underground.

The Ranger stepped forward, gripping the girl's shoulders with both hands.

"You shot him, not knowing he was a trusted friend of yours, Joanne? You shot him to keep him from shooting me. Isn't that right? You don't think I'm Sam Kile, the stage bandit, do you?"

Hatfield's big shape had come between Joanne Weaver and the dead man. With an effort she lifted her eyes to study his face.

"I—know you aren't Sam Kile. You—you're the man who met Dad and Sheriff Deevers and me on the Laplata road the other day?"

The Ranger nodded. "I'm Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield, Joanne. Do you understand? I was sent here to investigate Sam Kile's disappearance. Did Aaron Crockett lead you to believe I was the one who killed Paul Deevers?"

A shudder ran through her body. She leaned forward, resting her cheek against his chest. Her stetson fell back and the golden softness of her hair, heady with a subtle perfume, was a caress against the hard angle of Hatfield's jaw.

"You're supposed to be Sam Kile," she said. "You're supposed to have killed the sheriff, yes—but you didn't. I never believed you did. I—didn't know who you were, but I knew you weren't Sam Kile."

Hatfield held her at arm's length, peering into her eyes. In them was the same dazed disbelief that had sprung into them when she recognized the dead man as Fosberg.

"Look, Joanne. I know it ain't easy to take a human life. But Fosberg was about to dump me into Shaft Two. Did you know that's what happened to Sam Kile,"

The suffering faded from Joanne's eyes as they lifted to meet Hatfield's.

"Yes," she whispered. "I know that poor kid Ranger is at the bottom of Shaft Two. I ought to know. You see—this isn't the first time I've been through that tunnel. I saw Sam Kile when he was slugged on the head and thrown into that shaft. I had no idea he was a Ranger working incognito then."

"You saw Kile die?" Hatfield gasped. "Who did it? Not Fosberg—you didn't know he was an outlaw until just now. Not Curly Mustane—he hadn't been here before. Who killed Sam, then?"

Joanne hesitated. "So many disillusioning things have happened, I don't know who I can trust and who I can't. How can I be sure—you are a Texas Ranger?"

Hatfield removed his badge from his boot lining. "This star may not mean anything to you, Joanne, seeing as how Mustane was using Sam's. My credentials are hidden in the lining of my saddle over at the Laplata livery stable. But the fact that Fosberg and Mustane brought me here to kill me should prove something."

The girl shuddered uncontrollably.

"Yes," she whispered. "The reason I knew you couldn't be Sam Kile was because I saw Sam Kile die." Her voice rose. "The man who tossed him into that shaft was my own stepfather, Aaron Crockett!"

Through Crockett was the only way Adele Trollon and Chipman could have known who he, Hatfield was, since he'd revealed his identity only to Crockett and Deputy Sheriff Paul Deevers, who had died before he could have told anyone.

CHAPTER IX

Joanne's Story

AARON CROCKETT was Sam Kile's murderer! The revelation came as no surprise to Hatfield.

Hatfield wanted to ply Joanne with a hundred questions, but she was close to hysteria, and this underground pit was no place to talk. The quicker they got back above ground, away from the Spanish Queen entirely, the better.

He stooped to pry Fosberg's gun from the dead man's fingers, recovered the .45 Joanne had dropped, and thrust them in holsters. Then, taking the lantern off its hook, he slid an arm around the girl and headed her back toward the tunnel.

Passing the tiered-up ore sacks he paused to kick one. Later on he would be making another visit down here to inspect the contents of those sacks. He believed he could confirm that they held high-grade ore, stolen from another part of the Spanish Queen workings.

As if reading his thought, Joanne said, "You've heard about the high-grading, of course? Whoever is back of our Spanish Queen robberies uses this stope as a storage place."

Heading into the tunnel, Hatfield took the lead. He said over his shoulder, his voice amplified eerily by the confining rock walls, like talking at the bottom of a well:

"Isn't Aaron Crockett the kingpin behind this high-grading, Joanne?"

They had reached the final narrow leg of the tunnel before the girl answered. Hatfield knew she was suffering a reaction from her shooting of Fosberg, a friend of hers since childhood, and was having difficulty controlling her emotions.

"I don't know, Ranger," she finally said. "I honestly don't. If I knew Dad was a criminal, I wouldn't hesitate to tell you. I hate him. I guess I've always hated Aaron Crockett, even before he married my mother."

A few moments later they were squeezing through the aperture into the dead-end tunnel connecting with Shaft Three. Of one accord they broke into a run, driven by an overwhelming desire to get out of these dank subterranean depths.

Both Hatfield and Joanne Weaver were breathing hard when they reached the elevator cage and boarded it. After a brief study of the control levers, the Ranger released the brake mechanism and eased open the throttle.

Steam-driven overhead machinery meshed gears, the slack came out of the steel-wire cables, and the elevator began its gliding ascent of the shaft.

"You were the one who followed Fosberg and Mustane and me into the shafthouse yard tonight, of course," Hatfield said. Getting the girl's nod, he went on, "And you jumped onto the roof of this cage just as Fosberg started it down?"

"Yes. I had to know what was going on."

"That was a risky business, jumping this cage. If Fosberg had heard you—"

Joanne shrugged indifferently, her eyes bleak. "I've been hopping rides on elevator cages ever since I was a girl, Ranger."

Halfway to the surface, Hatfield took the precaution of blowing out the lantern. There was no way of knowing whether someone — Crockett himself, maybe — might be waiting for the car to reach the ground level, to get Mustane's verification of Hatfield's death.

"How did you happen to follow us in the first place?" Hatfield asked, keeping a taut hand on the throttle bar.

Joanne said, "I was spying on that commissary wagon Laz Chipman drove out from town tonight. I've got a theory that the high-graders haul their loot to the surface by way of Shaft Two, and secretly transfer the ore sacks aboard Chipman's wagons, twice a month. He always leaves his wagon alongside Number Two shafthouse."

"And you thought tonight you might catch the high-graders red-handed at the job of loading Chipman's wagon with ore?"

She nodded. "Instead, I saw two men haul somebody out of the wagon—you. I followed you over to Shaft Three, knowing, because of what had happened before, that whoever you were, you were marked for death. I couldn't let that happen again."

THEY were nearing the surface now. Hatfield could hear the hoist drum overhead. He eased off on the throttle lever, palming Fosberg's sixgun with his free hand.

"Don't make any noise now," he whispered, easing the car to a halt with its floor level with the shafthouse floor. "We might have company."

He set the brake, heard the hoisting engine's revolutions tapering off, now that the clutch was disengaged. When the machinery went still, Hatfield stepped out of the cage, keening the blackness of the shafthouse.

When several minutes elapsed and he heard nothing, he groped for Joanne's hand and led her out under the stars.

"I've got so much to tell you!" she whispered, as they headed toward the outer fence and the gate Fosberg had left open behind him. "But we must get away from the Queen. I wouldn't dare go home —not after what happened tonight."

Not until they were well away from the Shafthouse Three area did Hatfield halt, in the blackness alongside a building he believed to be a company barn.

"How can we get past the guards at the main gate?" he asked. "After all, I was inside Chipman's wagon, coming in, and—"

Joanne said, "I can get us past the guards. We'll get horses. Leave that to me."

She left him then, disappearing inside the stable. When she emerged, she was leading two saddled and bridled horses—her own *blanco*, and a horse which Hatfield recognized as the one Aaron Crockett rode.

"Dad's probably still up, late as it is," she said. "He's got company from back east, you know. President of the syndicate and three directors, who have come out to find out why the Spanish Queen seems to be headed toward bankruptcy."

In saddle, they threaded their way through the maze of streets forming the big Spanish Queen workings, and shortly were facing the big barbed-wire barrier of the main gates, opening on the Laplata road.

"Who goes?" challenged a night watchman, emerging from a guard's shanty by the gate.

Without hesitation the girl answered, "It's Joanne, Steve, and Dad. We've got to make an emergency trip to town. Company business."

The gateman did not light a lantern. Unchaining the barrier, he let the two riders through the opening.

Spurring into a gallop, the two did not rein up until they had put a hogback between them and the diggings. Ahead of them was the narrow valley where Hatfield and the sheriff had been attacked

by Adele Trollon and her bushwhack crew.

While their horses took a breather, Hatfield recounted the true facts of Paul Deevers' murder and his own escape from the trap.

"Adele's father was the one owlhooter I tallied," he wound up, "and I'm positive that Lazarus Chipman was one of Adele's riders. The arrival of Crockett and those syndicate officials frightened them off."

Joanne said, "I'm not surprised to know Chipman is riding outside the law. It adds weight to my suspicion that the high-grade ore gets out of the Spanish Queen in his freight wagon every two weeks."

"Aren't outgoing wagons inspected?"

"Not Chipman's. He's trusted and respected out at the mine. By right, he should have had Dad's job—he made the discovery strike out at Spanish Queen, years ago."

Resuming their ride toward Laplata, Hatfield asked, "What can you tell me about Sam Kile's murder? How did you happen to be underground when Crockett tossed him into Shaft Two?"

Joanne said, "Paul Deevers had told me that the new man who called himself Peter Ramos was actually a Texas Ranger, investigating the high-graders. I slipped word to Sam Kile one evening to meet me outside Shafthouse Two, when Chipman's commissary wagon was standing empty in the alley alongside it."

HATFIELD asked, "You thought Sam Kile should know you suspected Chipman?"

"Yes. But when Sam arrived at our rendezvous that night, he wasn't alone. Dad and two other men I couldn't recognize in the dark, had him prisoner. Dad took Sam Kile down Number Three Shaft and I was riding on top of the cage, just as I did tonight. They—took Kile through that secret tunnel. And while two men held him powerless, Dad beat him over the head with a gun. And then threw him—into that shaft!"

They had ridden another mile before the girl got herself in shape to talk again.

"I suppose I should have reported all that to Sheriff Deevers. But I was afraid to. I thought maybe poor old Paul was in with the criminals, too. That was about two months ago."

Hatfield said gently, "You should have got word to the Texas Rangers, Joanne."

"I know. But then these bullion robberies began, and the word got out that Ranger Kile was back of them. I thought Dad was behind that, so—"

"He was. He imported Curly Mustane to impersonate Kile. Mustane was the man I knocked into Shaft Two tonight."

Riding into Laplata just as the eastern sky was beginning to show the pale pink promise of dawn, Hatfield said, "You have some place to spend what's left of the night, Joanne?"

They reined up in front of the livery stable. The town's deadfalls and honkies were dark. Laplata looked like a ghost town at this hour of the morning. The only sound was the ceaseless rumble of the reduction mill stamps.

"Yes," Joanne said. "I'll catch up on my sleep at Mrs. Plumeau's. She's the wife of the Wells Fargo agent. But what are you going to do? You wouldn't dare go back to Spanish Queen and try to arrest my father. He must have secret bodyguards—"

Hatfield grinned bleakly. "Before this day is finished I intend to have finished the assignment Sam Kile came out to do, Joanne. I'm going to wait for Lazarus Chipman to get back from the mine. I'll take him into custody first, and maybe Adele. Who is Adele Trollon, anyway?"

Swinging swiftly from stirrups, Joanne said, "Adele is a—a dance-hall girl at the Fashion Casino. Her father worked out at the Spanish Queen as a hoistman."

They led their horses into the stable. The night hostler was asleep, so they bedded down their mounts themselves. Hatfield took time to say howdy to Goldy, remembering how remote his chances of this reunion had seemed at sundown. God had truly spared him tonight.

When he had escorted Joanne to the Plumeau house in the rear of the Wells

Fargo Express office, Hatfield said, "I haven't thanked you for saving my life, Joanne. I—I'm not good at such things."

She was standing close against him, the swell of her breasts putting a maddening riot in his senses. And then, quite without conscious volition, he found himself pulling Joanne Weaver into his arms. A call as old as man and woman claimed them both. The girl offered her lips to Hatfield in a moment of ecstatic abandon.

It was Jim Hatfield who broke their embrace. He heard Joanne's eager whisper, "I could fall in love with you so easily, Jim Hatfield! But a thousand girls must love you—"

He said heavily, "A man in my job has no business thinking about romance, Joanne. A Ranger lives on borrowed time from day to day. I did wrong, taking your kisses. But I have never met anyone so lovely, so wonderful—"

The windows of the Plumeau living quarters suddenly blazed with light. They could hear someone moving around inside. The first red wash of daylight was streaming into the gulch.

"Joanne," Hatfield said, "you lay low the rest of the day, understand? It's going to be a busy day for me. But when my job's finished, before I leave Laplata, I've got to know where things stand with you."

SHE NODDED, knowing what he meant. Jim Hatfield had marked her stepfather for the hangman, as retribution for Sam Kile's murder. Regardless of whether Hatfield found proof that Aaron Crockett was mixed up in the high-grading out at the Spanish Queen or not, Crockett was finished here in Laplata.

"Take care of yourself, Jim," she whispered. *"Vaya con Dios."*

Hatfield hurried away down the alley. He headed for Chipman's Trading Post, knowing exactly where he intended to be when Chipman drove his wagon back from the Spanish Queen.

No one was abroad this early in the morning to see the Lone Wolf make his way to the rear of Chipman's mercantile. Between the floor joists and the ground level was space enough for Hatfield to squirm under the building. He crawled through the forest of foundation timbers until he was directly under Lazarus Chipman's sleeping quarters, the room where Adele Trollon and Curly Mustane had held him prisoner.

Unless he was badly mistaken, that room would be the scene of important secret doings before this day was over. Lazarus Chipman would return from his trip to the Spanish Queen with the knowledge that Curly Mustane had disappeared. Chipman might even discover Fosberg's body, down there at the 700-foot stope beside Shaft Two.

In all probability Chipman would communicate with Aaron Crockett. And if the two men had any plans to make, they would be far more likely to choose Chipman's private quarters here in Laplata than Crockett's mine office out at the Spanish Queen.

When that meeting came, Jim Hatfield intended to be ready to make a twin killing. . . .

At sundown, Joanne Weaver awoke from a day-long sleep. For a moment she did not know where she was. Then she recognized Mrs. Plumeau's guest room.

The Plumeaus were out front, making ready for the daily departure of the Marfa stage. Joanne dressed, washed up, and went out into the kitchen.

She was fixing herself a sandwich and a glass of milk when the alley door opened and Aaron Crocket stepped in without knocking. Her stepfather's face was haggard and she noticed the twin bulges of gunstocks under his coat.

"Joanne," Crockett said hoarsely, "why did you spend the night in town?"

The color drained from Joanne's face. She had always been afraid of this tyrannical man who had married her widowed mother when she was ten years old. She had been especially afraid of Aaron Crockett during the past five years following her mother's untimely death from cholera.

At twenty she was her own boss. But meeting Crockett's angry gaze now, she felt herself shrivel up inside, as if she were about to be spanked for some little-girl misbehavior.

"Well, Dad," she faltered, "I—you were busy with those syndicate officers. You never objected to my staying in town before."

Aaron Crockett sank into a chair. Joanne could never remember seeing him look like this. In his eyes was the wild glare of an insane person's, the same look she had seen in Aaron Crockett's eyes the morning after he had murdered Sam Kile.

"It may interest you to know," he said, "that I have been fired. The chairman of the board has deemed me incompetent to run the Spanish Queen any longer."

Joanne stared back at her stepfather, unable to speak.

"I am leaving," he went on. "As a matter of fact I am heading for Mexico as soon as it's dark enough to travel. You know, of course, that Ranger Jim Hatfield is on the loose."

PANIC stirred in Joanne. This was the first time Aaron Crockett had ever mentioned the Lone Wolf's name.

"Jim—Hatfield?" she said. "I—don't understand, Dad."

Crockett brushed a hand across his spade beard.

"I think you do, Joanne. I think you were underground last night. I found the imprints of a woman's boots in the dirt alongside Fosberg's dead body, there at Shaft Two. I saw the footprints where you and another person left by way of the gateway tunnel. That man was Jim Hatfield, the Ranger I ordered Chipman and Curly Mustane to destroy last night."

Crockett came to his feet, whipping back his coat tails to draw one of his twin sixguns.

"You're coming with me, Joanne," he said in a demoniacal whisper. "Not as far as Mexico, however. But you will never live to exult with Jim Hatfield over my abdication!"

CHAPTER X

Showdown

BOOTED feet rumbled on the floorboards inches over Jim Hatfield's head. For the first time during this interminable day that he had lain hidden under Lazarus Chipman's quarters, there was activity overhead.

It was pitch-black under this building, but there was enough twilight left for Hatfield to have seen two persons skirt the alley alongside his hideout a few moments before.

They had entered Chipman's place by the back door. And simultaneously two other people had come in from the front of the store. One of them probably was Lazarus Chipman. Hatfield could not guess the identity of the other.

And then he heard Chipman's hoarse voice as, lighting a lamp, he caught sight of the previous two arrivals.

"Aaron! Why in tunket are you fetching Joanne in here?"

Aaron Crockett's harsh voice reached Hatfield's ears:

"Adele," he asked, "you weren't out at the Queen last night, were you?"

Adele Trollon—she must have been the one who had entered from the store with Chipman—said caustically, "Of course not. I did my usual stint at the Fashion."

Chipman said curiously, "What are you driving at, Aaron?"

Hatfield heard Crockett say after a slight pause, "Then that settles it. Joanne *was* down in the mine last night. She knows what happened to Curly. She must know how Hatfield managed to get a gun and kill Fosberg. I saw her boot prints in the stope."

Hatfield eased himself up on knees and elbows. The time had come to force a showdown up there in Chipman's room!

But Crockett's next words killed that plan aborning.

"Hitch up your wagon and fetch it

around back, Laz. You'll take Adele and Joanne out to the Skeleton Gulch shack. I've got a meeting with the boys out there tonight. For the last time."

Chipman said in an aghast voice, "You mean our high-grading is over, just because you won't be out at the Queen any longer?"

Crockett replied, "Tonight we divvy our haul and go our separate ways, Laz. I'm heading for Chihuahua. You'd better come with me. Texas isn't big enough to hold you and Jim Hatfield, too. Same goes for you, Adele."

Hatfield heard the back door slam. He saw Lazarus Chipman's boots heading off toward the barn in the rear of the Trading Post property.

The Lone Wolf's heart was racing. Joanne, somehow or other, had run afoul of her father, despite his warning for her to remain in hiding at Plumeau's. He was positive she had not come here of her own accord. The fact that he had not heard her utter a sound hinted that she was gagged.

Crockett was assembling his high-graders at some rendezvous tonight—Skeleton Gulch, wherever that was. Chipman would be taking the girls out to that meeting, aboard the wagon. Hatfield had to follow that wagon!

Crawling out from under the building, he reached the Main Street and broke into run, heading for the livery where Goldy was stabled.

He settled his feed bill and saddled up. Then he put a question to the night hostler.

"Aquainted here? Know where I could locate a place called Skeleton Gulch, hombre?"

The hostler nodded. "Laz Chipman's old mining claim? Sure. Cross the ridge south of town and head along the old mining road till you come to a fork about three miles out. Left fork bears due south. That's Skeleton Gulch."

Hatfield stepped into stirrups.

The hostler said, "If you aim to do any prospecting out thataway, forget it. Chipman's claim petered out years back. That's why he abandoned his shack and went on to discover the Spanish Queen lode over west."

Thanking the stableman, Hatfield headed out of town until he picked up the south ridge of the gulch. He followed this until he came to a break where a weed-grown, long unused wagon road crossed over the ridge.

HE HAD waited less than a quarter of an hour when he heard hoofbeats and the creaking of ungreased axles. Pulling Goldy back into a bosque of mesquites, he saw Lazarus Chipman's big Pittsburgh wagon lumber over the divide and head south.

Joanne Weaver gagged with a bandanna, and with her arms trussed behind her back, sat between the storekeeper and Adele Trollon. Hatfield saw the glint of moonlight on a gun which the dance-hall girl was holding in her lap.

It was certain that no one in Laplata had seen this wagon pull out of town from the rear of the Trading Post. The moon now was barely five minutes above the horizon, and until then it had been pitch dark.

There was no trace of Aaron Crockett on the wagon, but the dust of a horseman's passage clung to the road snaking off into the malpais. Hatfield knew the deposed Spanish Queen superintendent was already headed on the first leg of his getaway journey to the Rio Grande, with the one stop-over for a last accounting. He had ridden on ahead of the wagon.

Giving Chipman's wagon a ten-minute head start, Hatfield spurred Goldy out onto the abandoned mining road and began his pursuit of the wagon. There would be no losing it on a night like this. His only precaution must be to avoid being seen by Adele or Chipman. At the first hint that they were being followed, there was not a doubt that Joanne Weaver's life would be forefeit.

Three miles from Laplata, precisely according to the livery stable hostler's directions, the road forked. The wagon tracks showed that the big Pittsburgh

had turned off with the south fork landing into Skeleton Gulch.

Reining Goldy into that fork, keeping the sorrel at a jog trot, Hatfield studied trail sign in the dust. A number of riders had gone along this road tonight, ahead of the wagon. It was easy to guess that those riders had been Crockett's high-graders from the Spanish Queen, gathering for the last meeting at Chipman's old shack before Crockett hightailed for Mexico to escape Ranger law.

Hatfield would be facing heavy odds tonight. But it was a gamble he had to take. Uppermost in his mind was the fact that Joanne Weaver was a captive, marked for certain death. The high-graders who were meeting to divide their loot would not leave Joanne alive to bear witness against them.

Skeleton Canyon was a rock-ribbed gorge too deep for the moon's rays to penetrate at this early hour of the night. The fluted granite walls megaphoned the rattle of Chipman's wagon to Hatfield's ears and covered up the sound of Goldy's iron-shod hooves on the ledge road.

Rounding a bend of the cayon, Hatfield reined up. A lighted window loomed in the darkness ahead where Skeleton Gulch tapered together to form a blind box. Lazarus Chipman's long-abandoned miner's shanty.

Dismounting and ground-hitching Goldy, Jim Hatfield paused to check his sixguns. One had belonged to Joanne Weaver, the other had been the property of the night watchman, Fosberg. Both were .45 caliber, and Hatfield could use the extra cartridges in his belts.

He slipped shells into the empty chamber he habitually carried under the firing pins and headed on into felt-thick shadows of Skeleton Gulch. The lighted window of the shack was less than fifty yards away. Silhouetted against it was Chipman's wagon, the driver's seat empty now. Chipman and Adele had taken Joannne inside.

Nearing the outlaw rendezvous, the Lone Wolf caught sight of five horses

[*Turn page*]

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tied to a deadfall log. Five high-graders from the Spanish Queen. The small size of the gang amazed him, when he considered the hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of prized ore such a group had made away with during the past few months.

ROUNDING the big Pittsburgh freighter, Hatfield made a mental count of the odds he faced. The five high-graders, Chipman, Crockett . . . No, there would be four high-graders, for one of the horses was Crockett's. Counting Adele Trollon, that made seven besides Joanne, who were now gathered inside the stone-and-adobe hut.

Crouched low, Hatfield moved up to the slab door of the shack. Most of the *aguista* thatching was gone from the pole rafters now, revealing patches of star-studded sky.

Moving to the window, Hatfield had a look inside.

Joanne was sitting on a packing box in the corner, still bound and gagged. Adele Trollon, still wearing the white stetson and yellow shirt of the Yellow Jackettes drill team, was standing beside Joanne, her face twisted into the bitter lines of disillusionment. Her arms were folded across her breasts and her stag-horn-butted Colt was thrust through the waistband of her bibless levis.

Ranged along the wall to the right were four nondescript, shaggy-bearded miners from the Spanish Queen. Hatfield recognized only one of them—old Pop, the peg-legged man who had introduced him to Adele on the porch of the Trading Post. Had Pop done that deliberately, knowing who Hatfield was? Had Pop been a member of the ambush crew that had killed Sheriff Deevers two days ago?

The full attention of the miners was on Aaron Crockett and Lazarus Chipman. They were down on their knees in the center of the puncheon floor. They had stripped a moth-eaten carpet off the puncheons and were tugging at the ring bolt of some sort of trap door opening into a cellar.

When they had the trap open, Crockett and the storekeeper stepped back. Crockett, his face haggard as a skull under the rays of a lantern hanging from a rafter, turned his attention to the four miners leaning against the wall.

"All right, boys," he said in a weary voice. "The proceeds of our little business enterprises are cached down in Laz' root cellar. Every last penny, including the bullion Curly Mustane lifted from those Wells Fargo stages."

Crockett let that soak in. It was obvious to Hatfield that the Spanish Queen miners had not known until this moment where the crooked superintendent had stashed their loot.

"I've already explained that Ranger Jim Hatfield is on the prowl," Crockett went on. "Under the circumstances it is necessary for me to get out of Texas for good. Since Hatfield knows we lifted the high-grade through Shaft Two, it goes without saying that this good thing must come to an end. But there is no possible way the Rangers could ever find out that you four men were actually responsible for the highgrading, so I advise you to remain on the Spanish Queen's payroll. Whoever the new superintendent will be should be able to keep the diggings working at a profit for years to come."

Crockett turned to stare at Joanne.

"My stepdaughter took it upon herself to do a little detective work in recent months," he said in a malevolent monotone. "Chipman's cellar will therefore become Joanne's grave. There is no other way."

Hatfield moved away from the window. The door hung partly ajar. A sixgun poised in either hand, the Ranger looked through the narrow opening. Lazarus Chipman was lowering his legs over the rim of the cellar trap. Apparently he intended to pass up the gang's loot for division.

Raising one leg, Hatfield kicked the door wide open on its bullhide hinges. Timed with his leap across the threshold, he barked:

"Elevate, the lot of you! The first man to try a draw winds up in hell!"

For a frozen instant, no man moved or made a sound. The four miners had stiffened, staring at Hatfield's right-hand gun, swaying like a rattlesnake's head to cover them. Hatfield's other Colt was at the ready, poised to swing from Crockett to Adele Trollon, with the seated Chipman in the center of that gun's arc.

AARON CROCKETT broke his paralysis first.

Recognizing the rangy man in the doorway, seeing the glint of lanternlight on the circled silver star of the Texas Rangers on Hatfield's shirt, Crockett knew he had hit trail's end.

He made a cawing sound deep in his throat as he swung into a gunman's crouch, knowing he was committing suicide even as he started his draw.

His gun was clearing leather, coming out from under his coat tails. Lazarus Chipman was hauling iron at the same instant, from where he sat, on the edge of the square black opening in the floor. This would be touch-and-go!

Flame spat from the muzzle of Hatfield's left-hand gun. His bullet caught Aaron Crockett in the center of his spade beard, ripping through the mine super's throat and knocking him backward into the yawning hole of the trap-door.

The lantern flame jumped to the concussion of Lazarus Chipman's gun as the storekeeper drove a slug at the doorway. But Jim Hatfield was moving fast, away to his left, and both sixguns in his fists thundered as he met Chipman's wild shot with converging slugs of his own.

A gusty exhalation escaped Chipman's throat. He fell on his side, legs overhanging the trap-door opening. The gun fell from lifeless fingers, dropping into the cellar to land on Aaron Crockett's dead body.

Hatfield swung like a striking snake toward Adele Trollon. The girl had had her split second opportunity to get her own gun up and firing, and she had a fiendish desire to avenge her father's killing at this Ranger's hands.

But the dance-hall girl in the yellow silk shirt was tossing her Colt to the floor and raising her arms in surrender.

Across the room, old Pop huskily accused, "You had that Ranger under your gunsight, Adele. A hell of a time to get buck fever!"

Adele's red-painted lips twisted in an ugly line.

"Why should I have dropped Hatfield? My dad had a Ranger's bullet coming. There's been too much bloodshed on account of this high-grading business anyhow."

A bleak smile touched Jim Hatfield's lips. For a moment there, his life had been at Adele Trollon's mercy. He would never know what vagrant impulse of decency had stayed the jezebel's trigger finger, knowing the motive back of her thirst for revenge.

"Thanks, Adele." Hatfield thrust one gun into leather and drew the bowie knife from his belt sheathe. He tossed the knife at Adele's feet. "Mind cutting Joanne loose?"

Adele stooped to pick up the bowie. Hatfield made his way toward Pop and the other three highgraders.

"Belly up to the wall while I collect your hardware, boys," the Ranger ordered. "The four of you will spend the next few years in jail for high-grading. I reckon you know that."

By the time Hatfield had frisked the four miners of their assorted guns and knives, tossing them down into the treasure cave below the floor of the shack, Joanne Weaver was crossing the room, free of her ropes and gag.

Putting an arm around her, Hatfield turned to face Adele through the milky layers of gunsmoke which still hung under the lantern's rays.

He was looking at a fallen woman who too late had realized the errors of her ways. Once this girl had been as sweet and unspoiled and beautiful as Joanne Weaver. Who could say what pressure of environment, what inherited bad blood had made her take the wrong turn of the trail, winding up as a seedy dance-hall girl in a mining camp? It was not for Hatfield to judge.

"Adele," he said gently, and there was no trace of vindictiveness in his tone as he faced the woman who two days ago had been throwing lead at him, "who shot Paul Deevers?"

Adele Trollen shrugged. "Who can say? We were all shooting at that buckboard."

"How did you happen to be so handy to that road, when Deevers was hauling me back to jail?"

SHE gestured toward the four miners against the wall.

"Why, dad an' I and those four were on our way out to the Queen when we met Crockett fogging in. He said the Lone Wolf had showed up, that the situation was desperate and that we must keep you and Deevers from reaching town at any cost. That's why Crockett stalled off those syndicate stockholders, keeping them until the cool of evening to ride out to the mine, to make sure we had time to tally you and Deevers."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, thinking that over. Then he said, "I am not going to lodge any criminal charges against you, Adele. I have one favor to ask of you—and then you are free to make whatever you can out of your misspent life. It's not too late for you to go straight."

Tears misted the girl's lashes, streaking her haggard cheeks with mascara.

"Name the favor, Jim Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf pointed to the four high-graders standing against the stone wall of the cabin, their backs to the menace of his gun.

"I will need your testimony when these hombres come to trial on high-grading charges a few weeks from now. I know Aaron Crockett was robbing his own syndicate. I know he imported a gunman from Arizona to pose as Sam Kile because he got so greedy he went after the Spanish Queen's bullion as well. But I'll need a qualified witness to corroborate my testimony and make my charges stick."

Adele licked her lips. "How long would I stay out of jail, admitting I was one of the gang, Jim Hatfield? These hardcases will testify that my own father was the hoistman who took care of lifting the stolen ore out of Shaft Two and hiding it on Laz Chipman's wagon."

Hatfield smiled. "It will be your written deposition I will show a judge and jury, Adele. Witnessed in writing by Joanne Weaver here. I'll tell the court you escaped. Get out of Texas, Adele. Make a clean start in new country."

Adele was weeping unashamedly. She whispered, "I'll sign your deposition. And —I'll make something of myself! Just to justify your faith in me. I promise you that. And thank you, Jim Hatfield. I—I don't deserve it."

THE Lone Wolf bent his head to take Joanne Weaver's kiss. He saw the tears shining quicksilver-bright on her lashes, and sensed it was not a reaction from the ordeal she had been through, or the death and gunsmoke she had witnessed.

With a woman's intuition, old as time itself, Joanne Weaver knew that this rugged handsome lawman would be leaving her life shortly. He would be reporting back to Captain Bill McDowell that he had solved the mystery of Sam Kile's silence and had carried out the assignment which Kile had lost his life in trying to perform.

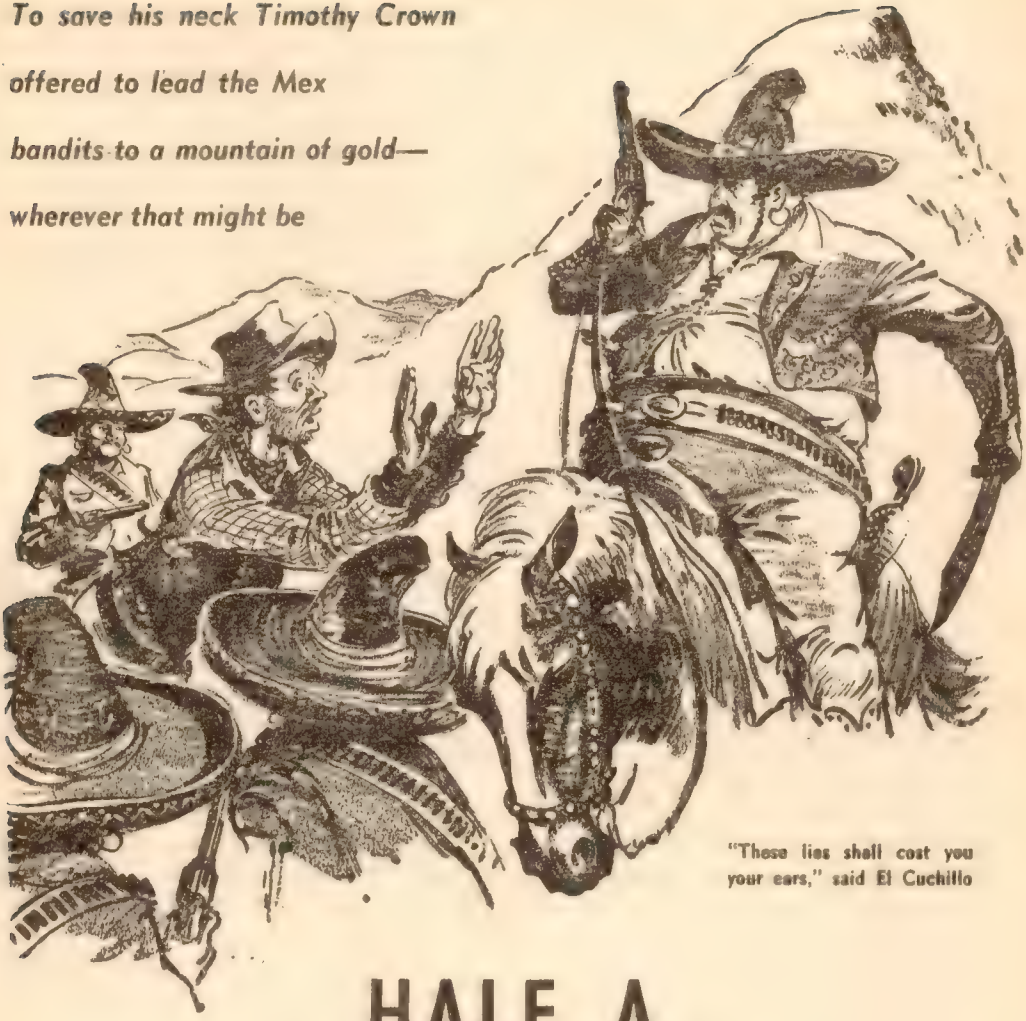
She would hear of this Ranger's exploits in the years to come, and thrill to the knowledge that for a tender moment she had clung to his lips and felt his own impassioned response. But that was all she would ever share with Jim Hatfield.

"We'll take our prisoners back to Laplata in Chipman's wagon," Hatfield said, keenly sensing that he was breaking in on poignant thoughts. "I'll have Paul Deevers' replacement deputy bring Wells Fargo out here tomorrow to pick up their stolen property. Let's get out of this place, shall we?"

Joanne brushed moisture from her eyes with a finger tip. Her smile was brave and full and wholly false.

"Yes, Jim. It's all over and done with—everything. Come on, Adele. We both have so many plans to make." • • •

To save his neck Timothy Crown offered to lead the Mex bandits to a mountain of gold— wherever that might be



"These lies shall cost you your ears," said El Cuchillo

HALF A SOLID GOLD MOUNTAIN

By FRANK SCOTT YORK

SOME men get their share of trouble from a gun; others from their women. The cause of all my trouble was a thing I was borned with and a thing I never could control as well as either weapon or female.

I refer, of course, to my big fat mouth.

I'd been warned about pan-mining so close to the Mex border. They told me there'd been raids and there'd be more; all about the hard feelings between us and them and how it wouldn't be long

before the rifles would be as hot as tempers were.

But I've always been a loner and don't mix with others' fighting. I guess I figured there was no man that could raise his hand to a friendly smile and a purely straightforward handshake. I guess I figured wrong.

I was working a nameless little creek just this side of the Border, about a mile from one of them towns that sounds like a sneeze. Since the war, I vowed I'd find me a solid-gold mountain. Now, five years later, I was beginning to feel I had my life's work cut out for me.

I was examining some pretty shaped pebbles and thinking about my supper when I heard the sound of plenty horses splashing up the creek toward me. I stood up with my friendly smile and waited, hoping whoever it was might have a mite of whisky in exchange for the straightforward handshake.

Then they came into view and my smile became a bit wobbly at the edges. They was Mexes—fancy boots, silver trappings, spook hats and all. And guns. Lawsy—the guns! Rifles nudging knees, hips sagging with artillery, and I thought a few carried knives in their teeth, the way the sun glinted off their mouths. I saw right off though, it was only the gold in their teeth as they grinned at me.

They pulled up, splashing me proper, and we stared at one another in turn, them grinning and me smiling till my jaw began to ache. The leader was evidently the fat, horse-faced feller with the shirt that didn't quite come together over his big melon of a stomach.

He leaned toward me and said softly, "Hello, gringo dog."

IT WASN'T a situation where you take offense easy. I raised my hand. "Well now, how are you fellers?"

"Hello, gringo dog," Fat One repeated, louder.

"How," I said, thinking they maybe didn't understand English and might know Injun talk. "Me heap glad to see you fellers."

"He insults us," Fat One said in amazement, staring at his men. "He mocks us, does the gringo. His death will be something fearful to see and hear."

"Whose death?" I gaped.

"Yours, gringo. Who are you?"

"Timothy Crown," I replied uneasily. "What's your'n?"

He flicked the ends of his mustache importantly. "They call me *El Cuchillo.* The Knife, gringo."

I was about to ask him where he got the nickname, but I spied the long, wicked-looking blade tied to his boot and decided it was none of my business.

"If you boys ain't in a hurry," I said politely, "I'll be glad to whip up a pot of coffee."

He spat at my feet. "What are you doing here? You are perhaps a spy—an outpost stationed here to warn of our approach?"

"A what?" I gaped.

"The gringo plays dumb. Dismount, amigos."

The dozen or so riders climbed down from their horses and surrounded me. Fresh sweat began to push through the old.

"I ain't no outpost," I said firmly. "And I certainly ain't no spy. I'm a prospector, that's all. A peaceloving, harmless, friendly prospector."

"Ho," *El Cuchillo* mocked, his eyes narrowing, "you pretend first that you haven't heard of me, then you say you are not a spy. These lies alone shall cost you your ears."

"Now look here," I said firmly, "what are you fellers up to?"

"The gringo plays for time. He would enjoy escaping, so he may warn his countrymen of our approach."

"Cut out his heart," someone muttered.

"Beat the flesh from his bones," another sang.

"Feed him to the jackals," a third rasped.

I began to catch the drift. "You boys are raiders," I said triumphantly. "The ones that have been making all the trouble—"

El Cuchillo bowed mockingly, his belly almost touching his knees. "*Si*, gringo." He straightened, wheezing a little. "Do you have any last words before you die?"

The seriousness of the situation finally hit me. That "beat the flesh from his bones," business wasn't joking. A few of the raiders were already looking about for clubs. It was almost funny. Here they was twice their weight from the weapons they carried and they were looking up and down the slope for sticks. I decided they wasn't too bright, and my mouth automaticaly took over.

"Yes," I said, standing straight as hickory, "I have a few words. I can't think of a more honorable way to die than at the hands of men I admire so. My last words is this—ride hard against the 'Mericans, beat the flesh off their bones, too. Don't try cutting out their hearts though, cause they haven't got any. Pick them up by their boot heels and bash out their brains on the rocks."

I paused for breath, noticing the Mexes were listening in open-mouthed amazement. I figured quickly I was on the right track.

"You, *El Chillo*, you are the salvation by which my revenge will cut down every Yankee from here to—to Kansas City proper."

"The gringo foams at the mouth," *El Cuchillo* muttered, "but his words are friends of my thoughts."

Some of the men were looking at me with respect now. The fat little leader rubbed his chin, his eyes sharp on mine. "Why," he asked slyly, "do you say these things? For your life, perhaps?"

I rubbed sweat from my eyes and struck my breast, knowing these people loved breast-beating and emotionment. "You was right," I said brokenly. "I ain't a prospector. I'm running away from the Yankees. They stole my wordly goods, killed my poor old ma and pa just because they carry my name. You see, fellers, I found me a solid-gold mountain awhile back—a little ways from here, near the Pecos Hills—and I tell you, I was a happy man."

EL CUCHILLO breathed, his eyes popping, "A solid gold mountain!"

I nodded impressively. "You don't even have to dig it out. You just have to *sweep* the dust away and chip off what you want."

"And this gold mountain—it was taken from you?"

"*Si*," I said, wishing I knew more Mex than one word. "When the Government found my mountain was half in Mexico and half in the Yewnited States, why they said it automatically belonged to the Government because it was smack on the Border, and everything on the Border was theirs."

El Cuchillo smacked his thigh angrily. "Oh, the dogs!" he shouted. "The tricky dogs. And to cheat my country out of their half of this gold mountain—"

"Exactly," I said sadly. "They said if I ever told about it they'd hang me, and every night since, they got men working on that mountain, chipping and hacking away *at both sides!*"

El Cuchillo was almost breathing fire. "Both sides! Thieves! Defilers!"

"Yep. And that's why I been trying to find you. I figured it wasn't right and your government should know about it."

"*Si*," *El Cuchillo* whispered. "It would be the right thing. Unfortunately though, my government does not look to me with kindness. In fact, amigo, there is a price on my head."

I started to move for my horse. "Well," —I shrugged—"of course I didn't know that. If you'll excuse me now, I'll go look for someone who ain't got a price on their head. I've enjoyed meeting up with you boys, and—"

El Cuchillo had walked up to me, tears in his eyes and thrown his arms around me.

"Brother!" he sobbed. "Poor, robbed amigo!"

He smelled something fearful and I wrestled myself free. "I'll be all right," I said uneasily. "Just as soon as I get my revenge."

El Cuchillo punched his fist at the sky. "You shall have it! Your honor and the

honor of my country shall be avenged! My government—pah, they will only frown and say unpleasant things. But *El Cuchillo,* he will act!"

"He will?" I asked weakly.

"*Si.* And you shall ride at his side. We shall no more make these small raids on Yankee villages for the sake of a few stolen horses. No, our reward for helping you revenge yourself will be gold—gold from *El Cuchillo's* solid-gold mountain!"

"Now, just a dang minute!" I shouted.

But I wasn't heard. The fat little bandit was raving in Mex talk to his men and they set up a roar that sounded like a rock slide. I found myself fighting off a dozen warm admirers that wanted to hug and pound me. Bottles appeared out of nowhere and I was in no mood to refuse the half-dozen thrust at me.

Twenty minutes later the cheering died down and *El Cuchillo* presented me with the last of the tequilla. Between the heat, my despair at the trouble my mouth had got me into, and the powerful beverage, I had some difficulty talking.

"And now, my brother"—*El Cuchillo* beamed—"we ride to this mountain. Plans will occur to me in time."

"Jush—just a minute, now."

"Our meeting was destined," *El Cuchillo* orated. "My hand clasps yours across the bad blood of our differences. Truly we are brothers in this common—"

"Dammit!" I bellowed. "Back away and keep your arms off me. I ain't about to show you my mountain. I was only—"

"Amigo, get on your horse," *El Cuchillo* said softly.

"I—"

"Get on your horse!" Somehow the knife hand left his boot and the little man was rubbing the blade along his arm.

I WALKED to my horse, wondering how in hell I was going to get out of the all-fired mess.

"Lead the way, amigo," *El Cuchillo* roared as I angrily threw the saddle up on my sorrel.

"Tell me something," I asked, turning toward him. "What was the name of the town you was going to raid till you met up with me?"

The leader of the bandits grinned and spat out the name of a town. It was the one that sounded like a sneeze.

I nodded, feeling a little better. At least, I thought, throwing a leg up over my horse, I can go to my grave knowin' I saved them from a raid.

"After we see this mountain," *El Cuchillo* said, "we will return and wipe them out."

There just wasn't a thing to feel good about.

I'd told them my gold mountain was in the Pecos Hills, so I led them in that general direction, taking as many twists and turns as I figured on getting away with. Still, it was only a twenty-mile ride, and by nightfall we neared the foothills.

El Cuchillo called us to a halt and leaned forward in the saddle staring eagerly. "Which one is it, my brother?"

I waved vaguely. "Right out there. But we better not expose ourselves. There's several detachments of cavalry nearby to keep away strangers."

"Pah on your cavalry," the leader spat, but he had dismounted hastily and went down on one knee while saying it.

The others followed him. I thought of making a break for it but my sorrel, while resembling a horse, ain't much faster than a crippled turtle.

"Tell you what," I said. "Soon's it gets dark, I'll sneak through the lines to my mountain—"

"My mountain," *El Cuchillo* corrected gently.

"Your mountain, and hack off a sample for you. Then all you have to do is think of a way to get at the mountain proper."

The fat bandit squinted at the lowering sun. "I do not know much about gold. I only know of its value. Will it be possible to carry off a supply and return again for more?"

I nodded seriously. "The soldiers have been carting it down in wheelbarrows."

"Ah! Then it will be as you suggest. Carlos!"

A tall, barrel-chested feller with mean eyes crawled up to us.

"Carlos," *El Cuchillo* said, "you will accompany our brother to see no harm befalls him."

That was for my benefit. *El Cuchillo* repeated it in Spanish for Carlos, grinning at me slyly. Carlos nodded eagerly, chuckled, and lifted my six-shooter from my holster. He stuck it in his belt before I could grab it back.

"Carlos is superstitious," *El Cuchillo* said apologetically. "You understand, amigos?"

"I understand," I said sadly.

I figured my last chance to escape was fading, and I started to scratch my head in anguish, when, from beyond the hills to our left, I heard the thin, piping notes of a cavalry bugle. And I remembered something that made me feel much better. Only a few miles away, just off the American side of the Border, was a cavalry outpost. Soldiers! I'd clean forgotten it!

El Cuchillo had thrown himself flat on the ground, his breath wheezing. "Ah," he muttered. "You did not lie."

"I never lie," I said indignantly. "Maybe it would be better for you to return home and think this thing out. You can reach me by letter at the postoffice in—"

"*Silencio*, brother," *El Cuchillo* snapped. "Do you think I will let you be cheated of your gold? We will make camp in the protection of those rocks."

I followed his finger with my eyes and saw a regular abutment of boulders strung along the crest of the slope. They were so evenly spaced as to look placed there on purpose. I ground my teeth in rage and thought nasty things about that mouth of mine.

EL CUCHILLO looked about nervously and stood up. "Come, leave the horses here."

He gave a lot of orders in Spanish. Two men remained with the horses and the rest of us crept up the slope where the leader dispersed the men in threes to the shelter of the string of boulders. It was a perfect hideout, with the men blending into the deepening shadows and no chance of being seen from any side.

Carlos, *El Cuchillo* and I were in the center of the line.

I was handed a fistful of dried beans and a bottle. The beans had been rolled in some kind of pepper and my tongue swole up with the first mouthful, so I was forced to drink some from the bottle. It burned more than the beans did, but in a different way, a way that gradually made me forget all my troubles.

By the time I'd finished the bottle, it was dark and I'd decided what I was going to do. I was going to wait till Carlos and I were off a ways, then turn on him like a tiger and stomp him. Then I'd run like a jack-rabbit for the cavalry boys and lead them back to *El Cuchillo*.

It all seemed so simple I just had to laugh aloud. I felt proud of myself for thinking it up and I almost felt sorry for what I'd do to Carlos. Still, the fool should know better than to take Timothy Crown's weapon and leave him his fists. I laughed again, flexing my hands and feeling powerful. Like rocks, the fists of Timothy Crown. No man could stand up to them.

"Something amuses my brother," *El Cuchillo* snapped, peering at me in the dark.

"Not a thing," I said carelessly, stumbling to my feet. "Let's get started. It's so dark, we'l have to feel our way."

"Your hat is over your eyes," *El Cuchillo* said sourly. "You have softened your brain with the tequilla."

"We'll see about that," I said mysteriously, pushing my hat back.

"Carlos will watch over you," *El Cuchillo* said softly, toying with that long, ugly knife of his. "There must be no treachery after I have accepted you as one of us. Your death would pain me—and of course, there is the matter of the golden mountain."

"Don't you worry," I soothed. "I'll bring back the nicest sample you ever saw."

I stumbled off into the night with Carlos trailing behind. The moon was rising and I didn't turn till we were well away from *El Cuchillo.* When I did stop, Carlos rumbled threateningly in his throat, and stopped too.

I waggled a finger at him, grinning. "Here," I whispered. "Come closer, so's we don't make so much movement to be seen."

He came up carefully, his hand resting on his gunbelt. I pointed directly to the largest of the Pecos Hills. "That's it." I watched his black eyes glitter in the moonlight and he grinned at me with that hungry look men get when they're counting money in their head.

"When the moon strikes it right," I whispered, "you can see her glint. Sometimes, in daytime, it sparkles like a gold tooth in the head of a giant."

He didn't understand my words, but he stared at that hill like a bird dog at point and when I swung, my fist caught him flush in the mouth. Even without the tequilla, it was one hell of a punch if I say so myself. Lifted him straight up on his boot heels and set him down flat on his back with a thump that quivered the ground underfoot.

He lay there unmoving while I danced around nursing what felt like a broken hand. Something glittered by my boot as the moon came out full and I bent down, picked it up.

I couldn't figger what it was at first, then Carlos let out a long, fluttering moan and I saw the gap in his face where his grin had been. It was his tooth I held—a shiny, gold tooth.

I ain't one to steal a man's teeth and I'd started to place it in his hand when I realized I might need it. The soldiers might think my story the ravings of a lunatic unless I could show some proof. I stuck the tooth in my shirt pocket and stumbled off in the direction of the outpost. . . .

MAYBE I might not have got lost if the dang moon hadn't tucked itself away into some clouds. The tequila wore off in a few hours, just as it got real dark and I was beginning to wonder if maybe I wasn't going in circles.

I banged over stones and brush, fell up slopes and down slopes, and after a while figured I must at least be in the next state.

When I heard that cavalry bugle blowing wake up, though, it sounded just as far off as it had the evening before. Cussing myself for an addle-headed fool I staggered toward the sound. I must have looked like I was hand-fighting wildcats, what with torn britches, bleeding nose and a tongue the size of a saddlebag.

Then, outlined on the slope ahead of me I saw a sentry and I was so relieved I had to laugh right out loud. I started to climb toward him as he turned, then I stopped dead in my tracks, staring.

It was a sentry all right, but one of *El Cuchillo's.*

He started to jabber, and in a minute I was surrounded by yawning bandits and the fat little toad himself was hugging me. I was so dang miserable I just let him pull me around, calling me his little gringo brother, and heart of his heart.

Then he realized, pulled back and asked, "But where is Carlos, my brother?"

I lowered my head and took off my hat. "He didn't make it, Mister Chillo."

"Did not make it?"

"I got through the soldiers all right, but Carlos took with a sneezing spell and the last I saw of him, six cavalry boys was dragging him off by the boots."

El Cuchillo frowned and examined my torn clothes.

"Six others came after me," I explained tiredly, "and I had to crawl on my belly to get away."

The bandit leader sighed, "Poor Carlos." Then he grinned broadly, forgetting all about poor Carlos. "You have brought the sample from the golden mountain?"

I looked at the eager, pushing men around me and reached shakily for my tobacco. "It's a long story, Mr. Chillo," I began slowly, fumbling with a cigarette.

"A long, sad story."

He glared at me, snarled, and bent down to his boot for that knife. As he did, something dropped out of my tobacco sack and landed on his boot-top. It was Carlos' gold tooth.

My jaw was hanging and I couldn't speak for shock as *El Cuchillo* straightened slowly, his fat, shaking paws clutched around the tooth.

"*Dios,*" he whispered. "Look at it!"

"I can explain ever—" I began, trying to edge through the bandits.

"I have never seen such gold!" *El Cuchillo* beamed, rolling the tooth in his palm. "I have seen the dust and the coins, but never such perfectly formed ore."

"It surprised me, too," I whispered. "I just hacked it off with my boot heel."

"It looks," one man said wonderingly, "like a tooth almost."

"Why not?" I snapped, as my mouth took over. "Don't they make teeth from gold?"

"True," the man muttered.

El Cuchillo's fat cheeks puckered with concentration. "Truly amazing ore," he mumbled, squinting. "It even has writing on it."

"Well," I said heartily, "how about a little breakfast before we pull out? I had a pretty terrible night and you got what you—"

One of the men spoke to *El Cuchillo* in Spanish and the little leader looked up at me with sad eyes. "Sanchez reminds me of something."

"Yeah?" I said nervously.

"*Si.* He reminds me that Carlos is a careful man. Careful with his money and his possessions. Carlos is so careful he even scratches his initials on the back of his gold tooth."

"Imagine that!"

SOMETHING needly and sharp pricked my stomach and I discovered *El Cuchillo* was carelessly holding his knife to me.

"So," he said softly, "the gringo takes advantage of his brothers. He thinks to keep the golden mountain to himself. I am dismayed for him."

"I'm dismayed myself," I admitted.

"You can explain this treachery to *El Cuchillo?* You can tell him how Carlos' tooth comes to be in your possession?"

A low, threatening mumble arose from the men around me. I looked over *El Cuchillo's* head at the pink sunrise, the borning of the new day, and figured it was my last.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you," I sighed.

El Cuchillo nodded. "Very well. We will find this mountain without you. By the time the vultures pick the flesh from your bones, we will have found it." He then proceeded to cuss me out in his language and from the looks of admiration on the faces of his men, I knew he did a thorough job. "Take him up to the rocks," he finished, pointing. "Your bones will be found where they will serve as warning to your countrymen."

"About that gold mountain," I started to explain, figuring on making a clean breast of my little joke. But I was

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grabbed from all sides and dragged up to the crest where the boulders were strung out.

El Cuchillo panted along beside me. "We will spread you on top of the largest rock, little Yankee brother. Where you will sooner or later be seen. I will not deny you burial, though there will be little left to bury."

"That's right obliging of you," I snapped.

Even my mouth had given up on me. And I was so mad I decided I just wouldn't tell him there was no such thing as my gold mountain. Let them dig clean down to the hot place looking for it.

We reached the biggest boulder and I was bracing myself to go down swinging, when all hell and thunder broke loose.

One second it was dead-still except for *El Cuchillo's* wheezing and my panting, the next bullets was cracking around like crazy and they was followed by the thunder of carbines from the other side of the slope.

El Cuchillo gave a bellow of fright and he easily won the honors in hitting the ground first. The bandits were shouting and screaming with terror as the rocks were chipped and powdered over our heads. It was purely death to stand up. I never in my life heard such gunfire.

The white, sick-looking face of the bandit leader pushed up to me. Because of that big stomach of his, he was having a time getting close enough to the ground.

"So!" he screamed, foaming at the mouth. "So you twice betrayed me! You told your army—" A sliver of stone whipped the hat off his head and he yipped like a female.

"A white flag!" I howled. "For the love of Hannah, send up a white flag!"

He made a lunge at me with that knife, but his heart wasn't really in it and I managed to roll to one side. Staring at me bitterly, he hastily tied a soiled bandanna to the bore of his rifle and rolled over on his back. Like a man sticking his finger in hot shaving water, he jerked it up and down over his head.

The firing died slowly until again the only sound was *El Cuchillo's* wheezing. His men whimpered in the rocks and I could see a few were bleeding, mostly from ricochet.

I jumped to my feet, snatched the rifle from *El Cuchillo's* hands and hollered, "On your feet! March on out of here toward them soldiers."

Because I stayed to the rear, I was the last to leave the line of rocks and break into the clearing. When I did, my face and the rifle both sagged down with pure amazement.

A LONG line of cavalrymen—on foot—were advancing toward us cautiously. A short, red-faced major led them, and he was almost hopping up and down with rage.

"You men!" he yelled. "All of you! Drop them guns and don't move."

"Do like he says," I ordered *El Cuchillo*, jabbing him in the backside with the Mex rifle. He nodded sadly and gave the order. I stepped forward and said to the major, real polite, "Sir, I'm glad as hell you're here."

He looked like he wanted to belt me one with his little saber. "Oh, you are, sir!" he howled.

"Yes sir." I nodded. "I surely am."

"Well, you won't be for long! What's the idea of you and your friends camping in an army rifle range?"

"Rifle range?"

El Cuchillo clapped his hands to his cheeks and moaned.

"Precisely," the major yipped. "And—why, these men are Mexican! What's going on?"

My mouth automatically took over. "They are the bandit raiders of *El Cuchillo,*" I said proudly. "The one who's been scaring the plain hell out of folks around here for—"

El Cuchillo! Did you say, *El Cuchillo!*"

"I did, Major, I did."

He turned from me swiftly. "Put them under arrest—search them for hidden weapons. Gad, this is a day! The whole crew of them."

I listened to him bellowing orders and

he seemed to have everything under control, so I sat down and began to shake all over.

He came over to me as the mournful bandits were led away. He stared down at me for a full moment then said, "Mister, do you mind answerin' a few questions?"

I shook my head slowly. "Not now, soldier-boy, not now. Just let me sit here a spell and think. I can't even figure it out myself yet."

"Well, on your feet and march, young man," he snapped. "The colonel will want to ask you more than just a few, and I advise you to think up some good answers for him."

As he led me away, I turned and looked back at the line of boulders on the crest. Each had a small, pocked, white bull's eye painted in the center. . . .

An hour or so later, when I'd told my story and repeated it three times to make them believe it, I dug into a bowl of army beans before taking my leave. The colonel was still staring at me silently, and with considerable amazement.

The red-faced little major came in, saluted briskly and growled, "We've questioned him all this time, sir, but that Mex is out of his head. Keeps babbling about a solid gold mountain that half belongs to him."

The colonel hid his mouth in his hand and said, "A solid gold mountain? What kind of nonsense is that? Crown, do you know anything about it?"

I smiled at him gratefully. He was going to keep that part a secret for my sake and reputation.

"Well?" the major snapped, frowning at me.

I shrugged. "Pore feller," I sympathized. "His mind must have snapped. I thought he was a little wild-eyed."

The major scratched his head. "Damnedest business I ever heard of. Well, Mr. Crown, I guess we owe you a vote of thanks. That fellow has been a real problem."

"Don't mention it," my mouth said. "Any time at all." ● ● ●

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As Ezra tottered, Jeff fired again

The knowledge that he was going to die gave Ezra Kane just the weapon he needed

The Last Attack

By H. G. ASHBURN

GIVE it to me straight, Doc," said Ezra Kane, when the medico had finished his examination.

Dr. Jenkins rubbed the gray stubble on his chin and crossed the small, crowded room that reeked of medicinal odors. His watery eyes sought those of his patient and held them for a long moment.

Finally he said, "It's your ticker, Ezra, not indigestion. You've had two serious attacks. I've never seen anyone live through a third."

Ezra Kane took the jolting news without

batting an eye. His only reaction was a tightening of the iron muscles in his lean, square jaw.

"How long you figure I got?" he asked.

"Hard to say," replied the doctor. "A few months, perhaps, if you're careful. A few hours if you're not."

In the back of Kane's mind a thought stirred, indefinite, but infinitely urgent. It seemed as if he had some duty to perform, or some precaution to take, like checking the cartridges in the chamber of his Colt before engaging in a gunfight. But it wasn't that. He couldn't think just what it was he should do. He studied the lean man before him. Doc Jenkins had his weaknesses, but he was a good doctor. As Ezra Kane eyed the medico's sharp, hawklike features, he could see he was getting the doctor's honest opinion.

"That don't give me much time," he muttered, and ground his teeth.

There was a gray pallor under the weathered mahogany of his leathery skin. Facing death was no new experience for him, but until now he had always had a fighting chance. This time he was threatened by an unseen, unpredictable foe, and it had him baffled.

His steady, steel-blue eyes flicked about the small room with its worn, faded furnishings. Familiar objects took on a new look, almost as if he were noticing them for the first time.

"Your best bet is to be quiet," said Doc Jenkins. "No whisky or tobacco, no strenuous exercise or heavy eating. Just take it easy."

"That don't leave much," said Ezra, trying to smile. He got to his feet and crossed to the door, dropping the tablets Jenkins had given him into his pocket. "Thanks, Doc," he muttered, and stepped outside.

EZRA KANE was a quiet man. Always before he spoke he would consider well what he had to say, and he would lop off every superfluous syllable before he uttered a word. With people, he neither approved nor disapproved the action of any man, except as they directly concerned himself.

He had crowded a lot of living into his fifty-one years. Since childhood he had been forced to fight his own battles. He had learned to rely upon his alert eyes, his swift gun hand, and his iron constitution. He never faltered in confronting a situation.

Facing death, he had come to think, was much like sitting in a game of poker. If a man played his hand carefully—and *he* did—he usually won. But this time the cards were stacked against him and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. To put the cap on it all, now that he was about to leave the world it began to look interesting to him.

He scowled as he tried to fathom the strange feeling that gnawed at his mind—that thing he could not identify.

A voice behind him brought him wheeling around.

"Where's that slimy sidewinder you work for?"

"Jeff?" Kane said in a calm voice to Johnny Ryle, the young homesteader he faced. "Ain't seen him lately. I been sick."

Young Ryle, in his early twenties, tall and clean-cut, had homesteaded along the creek just beyond the big Flying M spread belonging to Jeff Milnor, for whom Kane was foreman. Ezra like Johnny, liked the young fellow's friendship, and had often stopped at Ryle's cabin for coffee and a little gab.

"What's eating you, Johnny?" Kane asked, as his gaze took in the gunbelt around the homesteader's lean waist. Johnny usually left his artillery at home when he came to town.

"Milnor's cut off my water supply," Ryle growled. "I rode up last night and saw where he's dammed up the creek."

"What you aiming to do?" demanded Kane.

"Do?" Johnny repeated angrily. "Why, if he don't let that water through I'll cut him down, that's what I'll do!" And Ezra saw the wildness in the young fellow's gray eyes.

"You ain't got a chance against him in a gunfight, kid," Ezra said.

"I'll take a chance on that!" Johnny flung out hotly.

Ezra Kane was thinking—hard. He knew Jeff Milnor, only too well. Jeff had moved into this valley ten years ago, and now he controlled most of the range. Those who stood in his way had a habit of selling out cheap, or meeting with a serious accident. Now it looked as if it were Johnny Ryle's turn. And Johnny didn't have the ghost of a chance!

Jeff had his hand in every important business in this town, and his word was law. His money was behind the bank, the mercantile store, the saloons and the hotel —most of the other businesses. His men held the public offices—all except that of circuit judge for the district, to which Judge Crowley had been appointed. But even a man as able as Crowley was, he was powerless against Milnor's roughshod methods, as long as no one dared to testify against the wily owner of the Flying M. Milnor was the piper all right, and everybody in town danced to his music.

Johnny Ryle was plunging into a hopeless battle. An ironical smile twisted Kane's lips as the thought came to him that maybe he'd have company on his trip to the happy hunting grounds—young company. The thought somehow seemed to establish a bond between them.

"Thought you was getting married tomorrow," Ezra said, after a moment.

"Jane called it off," the homesteader answered bitterly. "Guess she knows if I lose my ranch I can't keep a roof over her head."

"You was doing pretty good, I thought," said Kane.

"I got enough beef to pay off the mortgage at the bank and give us a good start —if I can keep 'em alive."

"I'll let you know if I see Jeff," Ezra said.

TURNING his back on Johnny, he walked away. That disturbing urge he couldn't understand was confusing his thoughts, and he needed time to think. Slowly he strolled down the street.

"Wonder what it's like on the other side," he muttered, as he tried to vision what lay before him.

This was the first time in his life that he had so much as given a thought to any hereafter. And there was little now to console him as he thought of his checkered career. Often he had been at odds with the law, but he was true to his own code. He had never shot a man without giving him a chance to defend himself, and he had never stolen from anyone who didn't have more than any one man needed. As for the rest—well, a man had to make the best of circumstances.

His life had been rugged. He had to concede that. His thoughts went back to the Civil War days when he had fought with the Confederates, later moving on into Texas. There he had lived the wild life of the frontier, rustling cattle in Mexico and driving them north. He had tied in with Milnor in those days, and finally had drifted west into the Territory here with him.

When Jeff had settled in Shadow Valley and started the Flying M, Ezra had become his foreman. They had a mutual respect for each other, but it was a respect for deadliness with a six-shooter, a knowledge of each other's crimes. Still, that had inspired a tacit trust between them. The fact that Milnor trampled on the rights of others was no concern of Ezra Kane's, he had always said. Yet he knew his own page in the Book of Life leaned heavily on the debit side.

Ezra stood in the quiet, dusty plaza that was lined with feathery tamarisks, and looked across the square at the ancient adobe mission. He didn't know why, for he had never been inside a church in his life.

He saw frail Father Pio move through the sun-withered garden, the loose folds of his voluminous cassock flopping around hs thin, bony frame. And suddenly—and surprisingly—Ezra thought, if anyone could supply him with the answers he wanted to know, it would be this ascetic old man. The Mexicans in the valley attributed supernatural powers to the padre.

Ezra moved slowly. The throbbing ache in his left arm reminded him of his last agonizing attack, when icy fingers had clutched at his throat. He recalled the heavy pressure under his ribs, and the choking, gasping struggle for air. The thought brought out cold perspiration on his forehead. Rather than go through suffering like that again, he'd hasten his end himself—with his Peacemaker. At least he would *know*—then.

As if drawn by a magnet his footsteps pointed themselves toward the door of the little cottage at the rear of the mission.

"Come in, my son," greeted the wrinkled old priest in a quiet voice.

The padre had eyes that seemed to penetrate into Ezra's soul. And the instant the foreman stepped across the threshold into the cool, dimly lit interior, he was conscious of an inward peace. All the worries and cares of the world seemed to halt at the door.

"Padre," mumbled Ezra, "I've never bothered you sinbusters before. But I've been thinking some, and I thought maybe you could wise me up on what I'll meet after I cash in my chips."

"After death, my son?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Sit down, and make yourself comfortable," said the aged padre.

His skeletal fingers closed the worn leather cover of the little book he was holding. . . .

AN HOUR later Ezra Kane walked out into the heat of the bright sunlight. The haunting urge had left his troubled mind—it didn't seem to matter now if he never knew what it was—but into its place had crowded a jumble of ideas. Strange thoughts that would have seemed laughable an hour ago. And through them he could still hear the soft voice of the padre intoning:

"I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; naked, and you covered me; sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to see me."

Simple words, and simple enough to carry out in action at the right place and time, thought Ezra, but everybody would think he was loco if he tried to put them into practice here.

He had often shared his bacon and beans with any stranger who had wandered into his camp, but in town here everybody seemed to manage to get enough to eat. And how could a man go around giving a thirsty beggar a drink? The only thirsty men he knew were down at the Longhorn Saloon, or at Mike's Place, next door, and they wanted whisky, not water. He was sure the padre did not mean that.

How could he take in a stranger, when he had no place of his own? He rented a bed at Mrs. Polk's. She was a kind old soul, and had nursed him through his illness. Perhaps it would do some good if he left the widow the few dollars he had saved. It would help her along until her daughter, Jane, got married.

Yet all the time, and even though his unexplained urge was no longer bothersome, Ezra felt that somewhere in the padre's words was the key to the disturbance that had plagued his mind. Of that he was sure.

Ezra Kane headed for the small frame house on a side street where the Polks lived. He had been staying at Mrs. Polk's for the last six weeks, to be near the doctor when needed.

"Hi, Jane," he greeted, as a dark-haired girl came out to meet him. "What's this I hear about you calling off your wedding?"

"It's no use," she replied dispassionately.

"Shucks," said Ezra, "Johnny's a nice young feller. He was hunting trouble, though, when I seen him last, up the street. You better have a talk with him."

"He won't have any trouble now," she said softly. "He'll not have to worry about a wife."

She sank down on the edge of the weathered plank flooring of the porch. Ezra squatted beside her.

"Reckon you ain't heard what trouble I'm meaning," he said. "He's gunning for

Jeff Milnor because the Flying M cut off his water supply."

"Jeff promised me he'd open the dam, after I called off the marriage," Jane choked. Two large tears formed on her lower lids, then tumbled down her young cheeks. But there was a defiant look in her hazel eyes as she lifted her head, brushed away the tears, and said, "I'm going to marry Jeff."

She took Ezra's breath away. Then he was remembering—Jeff had been a frequent visitor at the Polk home after Ezra had gone there to be near the doctor, Jeff ostensibly wanting to see how his sick foreman was coming along. But before long he had made no attempt to conceal his interest in Jane, as cold as she had been to his advances.

"Always thought you was sweet on Johnny," blurted Ezra.

It was the wrong thing to say, for Jane's head bobbed forward and the next minute she was sobbing into her cupped hands.

"Jeff will break him—he'll kill him!" she wailed. "I can't let that happen to Johnny! It's all my fault. Oh, I wish I was dead—I wish I was dead!"

EZRA was always uncomfortable in the presence of weeping women. This time was no exception. He got to his feet and uneasily fished for something to say. All he could think of was the old padre's words, and none of them seemed to fit the occasion. They were good words, but they simply didn't apply to the present day, and certainly not to this situation.

Jane jumped up and rushed inside, leaving Ezra groping awkwardly with his confused thoughts. Adding to his discomfort, a dull, throbbing ache began to pound in his left leg. A similar pain had preceded his last attack, he remembered.

He decided to go to the bank and have his savings transferred to the widow. So he started off up the street, but he walked slowly, favoring his painful leg.

In front of the Longhorn Saloon, he saw Johnny Ryle talking to a bunch of small ranchers. It was plain that the young homesteader had been drinking, for his face was flushed and his voice was loud.

As Ezra paused, Johnny was shouting:

"Jeff Milnor's been playing high and mighty around here long enough! We've all been afraid of him just because he's got more money than the rest of us have! He does just as he damn' pleases, and gets away with it. Why? Because we're all too damn' yellow to call his hand!" Johnny wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'm through being yellow! He ain't got no right to keep water from my stock. Somebody's got to stop him, and I don't see no reason to put it off any longer!"

"Big words, Johnny," Ezra muttered to himself. "But you can't make 'em stick."

This kind of talk would reach Milnor's ears mighty quick. Too many of these men listening were only too anxious to curry favor with the powerful rancher. The result would be a gunfight in the street. Johnny would have his moment of glory—but that would be all. Jeff would let him clear leather, then kill him before the young homesteader could trigger his Colt. It would be murder, but Milnor would be safe enough, with a plea of self-defense, and the whole town as witnesses.

The padre's soft words came gliding into Ezra's thoughts: "Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend."

There was another good thought that didn't work in this day and age. Johnny would lay down his life all right, but for what? Certainly no friend of his would reap any benefit from his sacrifice.

Yet it could be those words did contain the key that Ezra himself was searching for. Maybe it was his duty to keep Johnny Ryle from certain suicide.

"Hi, Johnny!" he called, when Ryle ran out of words for further boasting. "Come over here."

"You know where Jeff's hiding out?" demanded Johnny. There was a glassy stare in his gray eyes, and his tongue was thick.

"No, but you better go some place and get some sleep before you go hunting the kind of trouble you're looking for."

"I want a showdown with Jeff Milnor," blustered Johnny, "and I want it *now!*"

"You're jumping plumb into a trap, Johnny," Ezra pleaded patiently. "Jeff is fast with his hardware, and you're drunk. He'll put you out of the way, and then your little spread will be part of the Flying M."

"Don't try to beg off for him, Ez," growled the young homesteader angrily.

"You're the one who is in trouble, kid. I hate to see you commit suicide when your whole life is in front of you."

"I've always liked you, Ez. Even if you do work for that sneaking coyote. You never say much, but you don't lord it over us small ranchers." Johnny staggered over and put his arm around Kane's shoulder, leaning upon him heavily. "I ain't got nothing agin you, but I'm sure as hell going to kill your boss!"

KANE could see there was no point in wasting words on Johnny Ryle now. He caught sight of Judge Crowley at the other end of the plaza, crossing the street toward his office over the jail. That meant he'd hold court the following day, just in time to clear Jeff Milnor of another murder.

He was surprised to find himself condemning what Jeff did or might do. Milnor's actions had never bothered him before.

Ezra was hardly aware of it when Johnny left him and wandered into the Longhorn Saloon, for something more personal was claiming his attention.

His left hand was becoming numb, and he rubbed it, and adjusted his gunbelt that weighed heavily against his hip. As he approached the lower end of the plaza he saw Jeff Milnor ride up to the hitchpole at the side of the bank.

Jeff was a striking man who exuded an abundance of drive and power. He was tall, with broad, muscular shoulders, and the spring in his step gave evidence of the excellent care he took of himself. He was in his early forties, but the only signs of that were the silver flecks around the temples in his coal-black hair.

He's sure come a long ways since we rustled cattle in Mexico, thought Ezra. No more dodging the law for him. Here in Shadow Valley, even the law jumps at his command.

If only he were in Milnor's shoes, Ezra thought, then he could really put the padre's advice to work. Those who hungered could be fed, shelter could be provided for the homeless, care for the sick, and visits to those in prison could be eliminated by not trumping up false charges that landed so many behind bars. He could change the unhappy ending of their love story for Jane and Johnny, too.

Poor Johnny, he needed help now!

"How you feeling, Ez?" asked round-bellied Marshal Devlin who was sprawled in a tipped-back chair against the front of the jail.

"Little on the weak side, Gus," replied Ezra, pausing to rest.

He shifted his heavy gunbelt again. And even as he did, that indefinite, disturbing urge and what it meant suddenly became crystal clear! It was all so simple he wondered why he hadn't seen it earlier. A smile flickered in his eyes.

"Mind if I leave my shooting iron with you?" he asked the lawman. "Damn' thing weighs me down today."

"You'd look plumb undressed without that hogleg." The marshal laughed. "Never seen you without it."

Ezra smiled weakly and unbuckled the broad belt. He handed it to Gus.

"I'll be around to pick it up," he said.

The marshal's chair came down with a thump and he took the belt and holster inside. Kane limped across the street to the bank and mounted the step to the gallery along its front. Up the street he saw Johnny Ryle weaving slowly in his direction—and the bank. Someone must have told Johnny that Jeff Milnor was in town.

Ezra knew he had to hurry.

"Hey, Gus!" he called back over his shoulder. "Stop Ryle before he does something foolish."

"What's wrong with him?" the marshal called back, sticking his head out of the door of his office.

Old Gus was running true to form. He was always the last man in town to know when trouble was brewing.

"Take his gun away from him!" called Ezra. "He's got a bellyfull of red-eye."

"Sure. Ez—if you think I should. But he ain't done nothing as far as I can see."

The broad-bellied lawman started up the street to meet the wild-eyed young homesteader. Ezra Kane stepped into the bank.

DICK RUSSELL, the banker, was talking to Milnor who was seated beside a desk behind the railed-off portion at the rear of the room that served as Russell's office.

"Well, look who's up and around again!" greeted the banker. He arose and walked up behind the teller's cage where Ezra had stopped. "I heard you was under the weather."

"Yeah," said Kane, shooting a glance at Jeff who was absorbed in some papers. "I want to fix it so's if I cash in sudden-like that whatever I got left goes to Mrs. Polk."

"Sure, Ezra, but I didn't know you were that sick."

"Well, a man never knows when his time's up."

"Hell, you'll live to be a hundred." That was Milnor who had heard from where he sat at the back of the room. "When you coming back to work?"

Kane ignored the question. "Can you fix it, Dick?" he urged.

"Sure. You want to make a will? Or —say, I could put your account under both names. Ezra Kane and Minerva Polk."

"Whichever's the easiest," Kane said hurriedly. "Just so's she gets it."

The banker filled out a blank form and shoved it through the grating for Kane's signature. When Ezra had signed the paper, Russell took it and said, "That does it."

"Come here, Ezra!" called Jeff. "I got some real Kentucky whisky."

"Reckon I'll pass that up," Kane said, turning toward the door.

A pressure of gas was building up high in his stomach, and he felt the need of fresh air.

"You *must* be sick," Jeff said causatically. "Never heard you refuse a drink before."

"I am this time." There was a frigid edge in Ezra's voice.

"Maybe you didn't hear me, Kane," growled Jeff, becoming irritated. "When I offer a drink to a man, he drinks with me."

Ezra Kane stopped in his tracks. Outside, he could see Johnny Ryle, arguing with the marshal. Johnny seemed unwilling to surrender his gun. Judge Crowley came down to the street, probably attracted by the argument. He could do something, maybe.

A paralyzing numbness was creeping up the length of Ezra's left side, and in his arm and leg the dull throbbing ache grew more severe. In his mind he could hear the padre's words—softly at first, then louder until he could hear them clearly. Ezra knew now what he had to do, and he was confident he could do it. Slowly he turned to face Jeff Milnor.

"Put it any way you like, Jeff," he said. "I'm turning it down."

Their eyes locked. Milnor's were flashing, magnetic, commanding; Ezra's cold and unyielding. Though he knew well that no one in Shadow Valley who was in his right mind ever said no to Jeff Milnor. The rancher held all the aces.

"You forget, Jeff," said Kane, a cold, fierce anger paling his countenance, "that I know enough to put you away for a long time."

The suggestion of a smile lifted the corners of Ezra's thin lips as he drawled tauntingly, "You ain't exactly a stranger to me, Jeff. I know a few things that makes us about even."

"Yeah—you do, at that." Jeff Milnor smiled, too, but only with his lips, for his eyes were cold and calculating. He got up and strode to the gate in the railing. "But you ain't saying nothing. Understand?"

"You can give two-bit ranchers that

palaver," Ezra flung back at him, "but don't try it on me."

"Looks like I got to teach you who's running this town."

Ezra kept his eyes glued to Jeff's. In the eyes of the rancher was now a maniacal glare. The man's lust for power and wealth, his intolerance of anyone who crossed him had at last driven him to the border of insanity.

EZRA'S own gaze was unwavering as he challenged, "You can run your town, Jeff, but you can't run me." He steeled himself against the mounting pain in his chest. Cold sweat bathed his brow, although it was fevered. The muscles in his face knotted as he fought for control of himself.

Suddenly, he jerked his body to one side. But Milnor as instantly reacted to the movement. The rancher's hand slashed downward and his sixgun came up spitting fire and lead. With the thunderous report, Ezra felt the heavy slug slam into his belly. As he tottered, Jeff fired again. But though Ezra's legs buckled, and he was dazed, he did not lose consciousness. He heard Milnor's shout:

"He drew on me! You saw it, Dick?"

"Yeah, sure," agreed the excited banker. "I saw him go for his gun!"

The front door burst open and the marshal rushed in, followed by Johnny Ryle and Judge Crowley. They stopped short, staring at the scene before them.

"Case of self-defense, Marshal," Russell said hastily. "Happened right before my eyes!"

But Marshal Devlin was shaking his head, slowly, and unbelievingly.

"That sure is funny," he growled. "Seeing that Ez left his gun with me just a few minutes ago. Said it was too heavy for him to carry around."

Johnny Ryle leaped forward, suddenly sobered.

"If Ez dies, this is one crime you ain't going to wiggle out of, Milnor!" he growled. "Ezra ain't got a gun on him!"

Jeff stared at the man on the floor. Though dazed, Ezra could see his eyes pop as he looked for his foreman's gunbelt—and didn't see it.

"Get Doc Jenkins!" Milnor whispered huskily to the banker.

"Arrest him, Marshal," ordered Judge Crowley. "And I expect all of you men to appear in my court as witnesses to this attempt at murder."

"You can count on me, Judge," young Ryle promised firmly.

In moments the doctor came charging into the bank. He looked down at Ezra, then at the smoking sixgun that Milnor still clutched in his hand.

"Should've waited, Jeff," he said. "He didn't have more'n a few days to live."

"What you talking about?" shouted Milnor.

"He's had two serious heart attacks. He was in bad shape."

Ezra was smiling peacefully, not paying much attention to them, or to anyone else. When the doctor dropped to his knees and began working over him, he could scarcely feel the touch of the medico's hands. It didn't matter, anyway, for only one thought was in his fading consciousness. At last he had found a way to make the padre's words work! At last he knew the meaning of, "Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend."

Vaguely Ezra realized that Jane had rushed into the bank and was kneeling beside him, tears rolling down her cheeks. And Johnny had his arm around her. As from a distance, Ezra heard Marshal Devlin's voice saying, half apologetically:

"Jeff, I got to arrest you."

"Get the padre," Ezra whispered.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them the wrinkled face of old Father Pio was above him. There was a warmth in the padre's deep-set eyes that flashed an understanding to Ezra.

Then all weariness and pain left Ezra Kane as a dark gray fog seeped over him, clouding his eyes until he could no longer see. All he could hear was the padre's chanting tones, then they, too, faded. He was floating above them all, and the going was good. ● ● ●

PRETTY DEVIL

CHAPTER I

The Ravished Land

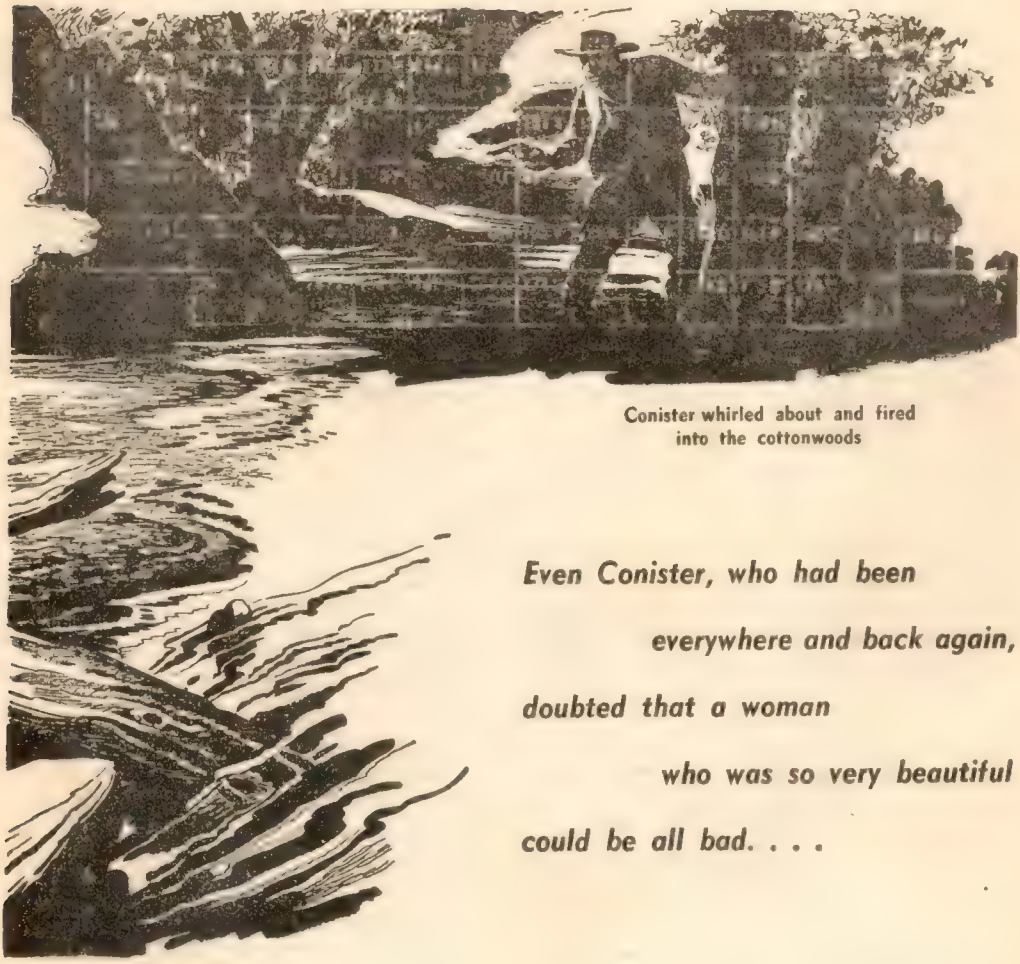
LOUNGING in a rawhide-slung chair by the window, a brown-paper cigarette in his scornful mouth, a glass of tequila in his thin, strong hand, Rip Razee said:

"How can a man take life serious? After five years of war, doing and seeing what we have done and seen, Sid?"

Under the old gray campaign hat his dark, broken-nosed face was bony and staurnine, the bitter eyes and scarred cheeks sunken. Rip Razee looked like what he was—a tough, battle-hardened soldier in a Lost Cause, but by no means defeated himself. Spare almost to scrawniness, he was wiry and resilient, all flexible steel and leather.

"How can a man drink tequila for

a novelet by ROE RICHMOND



Conister whirled about and fired into the cottonwoods

Even Conister, who had been everywhere and back again, doubted that a woman who was so very beautiful could be all bad. . . .

breakfast?" countered Sid Conister, smiling at his own lathered face in the cracked, watery mirror.

As he razored with smooth precision, he was reading some of his own military history in the broken contours of the fine bone structure, where care had to be exercised when he shaved. The depressed cheek-bone, made by a Yankee gun-barrel at Mechanicsville. The long crescent on the left cheek, a saber slash taken at Malvern Hill. A welted jawbone from a Union rifle butt on Seminary Hill at Gettysburg. The bullet crease under the firm chin, a memento of Cold Harbor.

The greater wounds were on his lithe rangy body—and the deeper scars that would burn forever inside him.

Rip Razee grinned. "Not being brought up too genteel," he drawled, "I'm blessed with a strong stomach—and a convenient short memory." He tossed off the fiery liquor without the slightest grimace.

"Fortunate in both instances, Rip," said Conister, in the soft, pleasant voice that was in keeping with his mild gray eyes and refined features.

Tall and loose-limbed, he had wide, power-packed shoulders and the trim flat waist and hips of a cavalryman. His bronze face, scraped clean of coppery stubble, he washed and toweled vigorously, and combed his dark reddish hair, which would have curled if he had not kept it cropped close to the well-shaped skull.

Watching him, Razee thought it was easy to see why young Captain Conister had cut such a swath with the belles of Richmond, when the War had been in its early romantic stages, and fancy dress balls had held brief precedence over battles. Even raving beauties like Iris March, rest her lovely soul.

CONISTER had married Iris before Seven Pines, and a month later she was dead behind the lines at White Oak Swamp. Way back in 1862. Now it was the spring of '67, five years later, and two years after Appomatox, but Conister hadn't forgotten, hadn't looked at another woman with interest. And never would, Razee was beginning to fear.

Conister looked out of place in this cheap Border hotel room in El Paso, a hovel of cottonwood poles plastered with sun-baked mud, the floor of dirt, wet down every morning by a Mexican chambermaid to settle the dust. But money, except with the locust-swarms of carpet-baggers, was scarce in the ravaged South through which they had been wandering. Only Razee's exceptional luck with cards and dice, which Conister often thought was more skill than luck although Rip denied it, had kept them solvent.

Crown Manor, the Conister home on the Chickahominy, now was nothing but great chimneys rising from the charred rubble of black cellar holes. Sid's father and elder brother had been killed at Pittsburg Landing the first year of the war. His sisters were married and gone—he couldn't have told where—and his mother had died of shock during the nearby battle at Cold Harbor in '64.

A confederate victory, the bloodiest half-hour in American history, but costly to Sid Conister personally. For he had needed his mother more than ever after Iris March Conister's death so quickly followed by the loss of his father and brother.

It seemed to Conister that everybody he loved was dead. Everyone but Rip Razee, the tough little first sergeant he had commissioned a lieutenant on the field.

It was Razee who had finally persuaded Conister to travel west. Sid's wife had been an heiress to a great cattle ranch near Tucson, Arizona. It had been managed by her aunt, Bee Belknap, with the help of foreman, Price Fariday. The widowed Mrs. Belknap, sister of old King March, Iris' father, was administrator of the estate, but when Iris had married Conister she had insisted on making legal arrangements for him to share in the March holdings, in case anything happened to her. Conister had paid little attention, secure in his own family wealth, but agreeing in order to humor Iris. He had always felt, since then, that she must have had a premonition of her death.

Looking back, Conister thought that Iris had always trusted Bee Belknap, her aunt, but had never had full faith in her sister Norma, although she had never said anything outright against her. Iris had wanted her kid brother, Tommy, to be head of the ranch when he came of age. Mrs. Belknap was getting along in years and not too well, Iris had told him, and Conister had promised her that if anything did happen, he would see to it that the estate was held in trust for young Tommy.

Now, Conister had to admit ruefully, he was going to Arizona—to the ranch—but more for himself than for Tommy. He had to find some means of earning a decent

living. There was nothing left for an ex-Confederate officer and bankrupt planter in the South. He couldn't even join the Army in frontier campaigns against the Indians without assuming a false name and credentials.

It was necessary for him to sink roots somewhere, to establish himself, and to find work. Drifting around aimlessly as he and Razee had been doing, they were sure to wind up flat in the gutter, or dead in some saloon or gambling house.

Dressed and ready, their valises packed and their guns belted on, Conister and Razee paid their bill and went out to get breakfast and wait for the westbound Butterfield stage.

They had enchaladas again, because even for breakfast there seemed little to eat in El Paso except peppery Mexican foods. Their tortillas were stuffed with beef, cheese, red chili and onions, and washed down by acid-strong coffee. Razee often declared that after eating and drinking on the Mexican border, a man's breath would ignite at thirty feet.

AFTER the meal they lit cigars and nursed drinks of brandy, listening for the blare of the stage-coach horn.

"Hope I can win enough to buy horses in Tucson," remarked Razee. "My back's busted from riding them damn stages."

"Plenty of horses on Fairmarch," said Conister. "If they don't throw us off the place."

"How come that fancy name, Fairmarch? It don't sound like a ranch to me."

"King March and a man named Fariday, the father of the present foreman, were full partners in the beginning. They rounded up a great herd of mavericks in Texas, when the cattle were left to run wild, with all the men away at war. Drove them north and built an empire of beef in Arizona with the Texas mavericks as a nucleus. Then March bought Fariday out, but the name they had dreamed up from their family names stuck. The spread has never been known by the brand they used. Fariday disappeared, leaving his son on the ranch, and not long after that old King March was shot to death. Never found out who killed him."

"They know about Iris cutting you in on the deal?"

"Yes, they know," Conister drawled. "But that's not saying they like it."

"Well, it's according to law, Sid. They can't fight that."

Conister smiled. "They don't fight laws out here, Rip. They fight men."

"We're used to that, Sid." Razee grinned. "We oughta do all right out here."

"Price Fariday is supposed to be quite a hand with guns," Conister said musingly.

"Well, we've learned to draw and shoot pretty fair ourselves in the last few years," Razee said. "I never saw anything quicker'n the way you took that tinhorn gambler in Memphis. I'm not a bragging man, but I was real sharp myself that night in Natchez. And we was both hellfire one day down in New Orleans, as I recall."

They left the smoky, spiced atmosphere of the Mexican café and walked across the sun-bright dusty plaza to the adobe stage station. Setting their bags down, they leaned against an awning post. A girl, smartly dressed in expensive traveling clothes, came out of the station restaurant—and Sid Conister went suddenly stark and rigid against the wood. The girl looked so much like Iris he couldn't credit his eyes. The same high, proud head, with rich waving chestnut hair agleam beneath the turbanlike *Marrio*. The same sensitive features, cameo clear and distinct, the curved cheek-bones and clean jaws and chin, the pure brow and delicate throat line, lovely and breath-taking. The same clear blue eyes, frank and direct under long lashes. And the same faint perfume Iris had liked was emanating from this girl.

Conister knew instantly that she must be Iris' sister, Norma. She could have been Iris reborn, he thought in anguish.

Shocked and numb, he tried to tear his gaze away from the girl, but his eyes wouldn't obey his will. Conscious of his scrutiny, the girl stared back at him,

coldly at first, then with a quick-warming interest that was almost recognition.

Conister's clothes were as travel-stained and worn as Razee's, but he possessed an innate elegance that was apparent despite the most disreputable apparel. Razee had seen it through the sweat and grime of battle, through the filth and fatigue of a long, bloody campaign.

Impulsively the girl was moving toward them when an overdressed half-breed intervened. Silver conchas on his wine-colored velvet jacket gleamed in the sunlight as, doffing his peaked white sombrero, he made a low, sweeping bow. His holsters and boots were inlaid with silver, and his black eyes were bold in a dark, sensuous face.

"Can I be of help to the lovely señorita?" he asked, insolently sure of himself —and of her.

She regarded him with unutterable contempt and loathing. "Out of the way," she ordered haughtily. "You people never seem to learn your place."

"But the señorita is alone, and I am most considerate of lonely ladies. Especially when they are so beautiful." He waddled forward, crowding the girl back against the adobe wall. He murmured, "One so exquisite should not be alone, señorita."

CHAPTER II

The Same Face, and Yet—

SID Conister was moving then, swift and slender, with effortless ease and grace. His left hand grasped the breed's plump shoulder and spun him around and away from the girl. The man's right hand dropped to an ivory-handled gun, but Conister's right hand smashed the dark heavy jowl with a clublike impact, twisting the breed's head and thick neck.

The Mexican bounced off the 'dobe, fell full length on the dusty planks, and rolled with surprising agility, reaching again for his gun. It cleared the ornate sheath this time, but Rip Razee promptly booted it out of the man's hand. When he tried to draw left-handed, Razee stomped the pudgy wrist into the boards, grinding down hard until the ivory-handled pistol fell free.

Razee stepped back then. Conister was standing beside the girl, watching the half-breed scramble after his guns and heave himself upright. A .44 Colt had appeared abruptly in Razee's right hand. The Mex eyed that muzzle, and holstered his own weapons.

"You'll pay for this, gringo dogs!" he promised, his eyes venomous. "I am Lopez, and Lopez never forgets." He turned and strode away, with all the pomp and dignity he could muster.

Rip Razee laughed at his broad fleshy back, at the fat rump straining the tight trousers.

"I didn't know it was Lopez," the girl said. "Perhaps I should have been more polite."

"Who is Lopez?" inquired Conister.

"A Border bandit—the chief of the Border bandits, I should say. He runs Texas cattle and money into Mexico, and Mexican drugs, jewels and dinero into Texas. They call him Banjo Lopez. . . But I'm forgetting myself. I meant to thank you two gentlemen."

"Nothing at all," Conister assured her, and Razee said, "A pleasure, ma'am."

"I'm Norma March," she said, looking up at Conister. "And there's something familiar about you."

Conister lifted his flat-brimmed black hat and inclined his auburn head. "I knew who you were the minute I saw you. The resemblance is remarkable. I'm Sidney Conister, Miss March, and this is Riplon Razee."

Norma March nodded and smiled, striving to hide some inner agitation. "Iris' husband," she murmured. "I remember you from the picture Iris sent. . . Are you coming to visit Fairmarch at last, Mr. Conister?"

"I thought I might," Conister confessed, feeling vaguely embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"Well, you're more than welcome, of course. We expected you long before this, you know."

"The War—and the aftermath," Conister said, with a swift idea that he wasn't really as welcome as this sister-in-law of his said he was.

"Are you taking the Tucson stage?" Norma asked. "Why, that's wonderful! So am I. We can get acquainted on the road then. If we aren't too busy fighting off Apaches and highwaymen."

"Hasn't the Army got the Apaches subdued yet?" Conister asked.

"There are too many Indians, and not nearly enough soldiers," she told him. Rip Razee grinned. "What they need's more Rebs."

"Yes, certainly," Norma said, without enthusiasm. "I wonder that you haven't joined up, Mr. Conister."

"They won't take us, unless we change our names."

Norma March surveyed him coolly. "You mean you'd have to serve in the ranks as enlisted men?"

"Don't mind that part of it so much," Conister said easily. "But I prefer to keep my own name."

"Yes, I suppose so," she said. "Iris wrote that it was an old, famous and honored name in Virginia. The Conisters of Crown Manor, on the Chickahominy." There was something faintly mocking in her tone, something that troubled and puzzled Conister.

"That's all gone now," he said evenly. "Crown Manor, the family and the name —except for me."

NORMA said, with quick, sincere sympathy, "I'm sorry. Fairmarch will seem raw and crude to you perhaps, but we'll do all we can to make you comfortable and satisfied there."

"Thank you. We appreciate it, Miss March."

Her laugh was so much like Iris' that it chilled his spine and clutched at his throat.

"I think you should call me Norma," she said, "and let me call you Sid. After all, I am your sister-in-law, you know."

"All right, Norma," drawled Conister. "That suits me fine."

"I just love your Southern accent, Sid," said Norma, suddenly girlish and gushing. "And you're even handsomer than Iris said you were, I do believe. It's so strange, meeting you like this. And now we have that whole long ride to Tucson together! I'm terribly excited, Sid."

Conister nodded, wondering at her abrupt change of manner. This volatile girl was as bright and hard and many-faceted as a cut diamond. So like Iris—so much like her, and yet . . . Oh, why, why couldn't she at least have chosen a different perfume!

"Here she comes," grumbled Rip Razee, as a horn trumpeted down the sun-dazzled adobe-lined street, blaring over the clopping hooves and rattling wheels. "My poor old busted aching back."

In the Concord, Norma March sat between Conister and Razee on the back seat of the coach. A traveling salesman and a young lieutenant returning from furlough had the front seat. The driver's bugle shrilled and the stage lurched forward on leather thoroughbraces. The high yellow wheels spun as the six horses leaned into their collars under the crack of a cord-silk popper at the end of the seventeen-foot lash.

The route lay along the Rio Grande where the river was shallow and the banks muddy and fringed with salt cedars and willows. It was all familiar scenery, and a wearisome trip despite the bright presence of the girl. Conister shared Razee's yearning for a horse and saddle.

Dirt hailed up against the floor boards, with sandboxes murmuring and axles complaining through the endless crash of the body upon the reach-and-bolster underneath. The horsehair-covered cushions were as hard as rocks, and dust with the sting of alkali filtered in constantly.

Drab, bleached river towns were passed, as were swing stations where the horses were changed, the axles inspected and greased. Then on toward Mesilla, New Mexico.

The little drummer and the husky young lieutenant eyed Norma March hungrily. She talked mostly to Conister, but Razee was just as well satisfied to be ignored. He had taken an instant dislike to the girl. She looked like Iris, but that was all. Her flirtatious way with Conister was like that of a honkytonk entertainer, Razee thought. Sid was being taken in because she looked so much like her dead sister.

In Mesilla they stopped for a meal, then rolled on in cramped discomfort and monotony. But still Norma March was vivacious and gay and tireless. Conister was fascinated by the girl, yet he wished he hadn't met her. She resembled Iris too much, and it brought back all his heartbreak, grief and desolation.

Half-drowsing and suddenly waking at intervals, he could almost believe Iris *was* beside him. The same profile and scent, the same deep-stirring thrill from the pressure of her shoulder and arm, her thigh and knee.

Norma told him about Fairmarch. She was warm in her praise of Price Fariday, but cool and rather noncommittal about Bee Belknap, and completely indifferent about young Tommy who had been sent East to school. They had lost some stock to the Apaches and white rustlers, she said, perhaps to Banjo Lopez' Border ruffians, but in general the ranch was prospering, thanks mainly to Price Fariday. Apparently the foreman was quite a hero to this girl. Conister felt an absurd and unreasonable twinge of jealousy. It was, he tried to convince himself, simply because Norma was the image of Iris.

THEY rode all night, and even Norma was finally jounced into a dazed stupor. She slept fitfully, with her head on Conister's shoulder. He was uncomfortable but strangely happy. There's something about having a lovely girl asleep on your shoulder, he thought, something about her so innocent and pure, and trusting and helpless, that brought out all the tenderness in a man.

By morning Sid Conister was half in love with the sister of his dead wife.

The second day brought them into the broad rich green-gold valley of the San Simon. The Chiricahuas rose in jagged grandeur at the northern juncture of that great range with the lesser barrier of the Dos Cabezas.

There was something sinister about Apache Pass, and even Norma realized it, for when she spoke of all the blood, both white and savage, which had been spilled there, it was in hushed tones.

They spent the night at the station, and Razee scowled into his whisky glass when Conister and Norma March went out to walk under the starry moon-silvered heavens. The bark of a coyote, a wolf's mournful howl, or the hoot of an owl would put that girl in Sid's arms, he knew with cold certainty. And he blamed himself fervently for ever having suggested this venture into the West.

In the morning grayness the coach climbed the winding canyon of Apache Pass, strewn with rocks and shale, spiked with cactus and Spanish bayonet and graceful ocotillo, scattered with waxy-leafed mesquite, squat greasewood shrubs, and odorous creosote brush. A deep crooked ten-mile gash through the mountains, that had seen more murder and mayhem than any similar span in Arizona.

But nothing happened this day. No blood-mad Apaches came screaming to the attack, no masked holdup men barred the way. The Concord clattered on, out of the mountains and across irrigated farmlands toward the pueblo of Tucson, on the Santa Cruz.

Conister was almost reluctant to have the journey end. And he was vaguely disappointed not to have had a chance to fight off Indians or robbers before the blue eyes of Norma March. Catching himself up with self-disgust, he wondered if he was entering his second childhood or something. Was he getting senile before thirty, or just going a little crazy?

Tucson, they found, was almost as Mexican as El Paso and the other Rio Grande settlements. The town was built around a central plaza. Boxlike adobe houses,

churches with bell towers rose against the brassy blue sky.

There were mules and barking dogs, yelling dark imps of children, and stolid sloe-eyed women in gaudy shawls. There were adobe walls and archways, refuse-littered alleys with garbage cans and rain barrels, chinaberry trees, public stone wells and horse troughs.

An American town, but it looked and smelled Mexican. Rip Razee noted with satisfaction the incredible number of saloons and gambling halls.

Norma wanted them to come out to Fairmarch with her at once, but Conister insisted that they spend at least one night in town. They needed shaves, haircuts, baths, and new outfits of clothing. They required time to get acclimated a bit, and it would also give the people of Fairmarch an interval to prepare for their arrival.

"Not that we expect a fiesta or anything, Norma," said Conister, smiling with his easy boyish charm.

But Norma was scarcely listening, and her smile was automatic and meaningless. As they neared the plaza, she lost interest in Conister entirely, her eyes searching the crowded board walks for someone. Evidently the man she expected to meet her, and that would be Price Fariday.

Repulsed and hurt beyond reason, Sid Conister felt hostile to Fariday before ever laying eyes on the man.

CHAPTER III

Southern Belle

AT THE depot, Conister handed Norma down from the coach with his habitual easy grace, and said a pleasant good-by to the Army man and the salesman. Both tried to catch Norma's eye, but she wasn't seeing any of her fellow passengers at the moment.

The man who came forward to greet her, however, certainly was not Price Fariday. He was lank, wizened, and old. His legs were widely bowed, he had thinning gray hair, a gray mustache, squinty bleached eyes, and a prominent beak of a nose.

Not even trying to hide her disappointment, Norma disregarded his drawled welcome and demanded:

"Where's Price?"

"Well, Miss Norma, he had a lot of business to tend to, so he told me to meet you and fetch you home."

"Is he in town, Hank?"

"Well now, I reckon he is, ma'am. But he had a lot of things—"

"Yes, I know!" Norma's eyes and features had hardened until there was barely any resemblance to Iris left.

Conister was aware of a chilled, sinking sensation. This girl had a wicked temper, and when it was aroused she might do almost anything. She looked now as if she were ready to strike the old cowman in front of her.

The transformation that came then was as quick and bewildering as that which Canister had noted before. With the warmest of friendly smiles and gestures, she took the old man's arm and introduced him as Hank Dittrich, her father's favorite rider, and still the best tophand in Arizona.

With a shy grin, the old-timer shook hands with Conister and Razee, mumbling that he was sure pleased to meet them. He had a matched pair of bays and a light covered buggy at the nearby rack, and they loaded Norma's luggage on the rear.

Conister helped her into the shaded seat. But Norma said farewell to him in an absent, diffident manner that left him cold and baffled.

"I can't figure that girl out, Rip," he said, watching the varnished, polished buggy roll away, smooth and glittering in the sunlight.

"I can, Sid," said Razee. "She's crazy in love with that Fariday."

"She must've been playing games with me, then."

"Sure she was. It helped pass the time and the miles, Sid."

Conister smiled wearily. "I must be out of practice with women. Used to be able to tell whether they were fooling or serious."

"It's like shooting or anything else," Razee said. "You got to keep at it or you get rusty. I never figured it was worth it, all the time you have to waste courting a nice girl. The ones you can buy are a helluva lot more honest and practical, and no strings attached to the bargain."

Conister laughed and struck his friend's wiry shoulder. "There's no romance in you, Razee."

"For which," said Razee, "I am duly grateful."

They purchased new clothes and went to the local tonsorial artist, where they took turns in the backroom bathtub and the barber's chair in front. Conister tried to draw the barber out on the subject of Fairmarch, but he seemed reluctant to discuss the ranch.

Conister remembered then that Iris had sometimes shown a similar evasiveness. She had said once, "You'd never stay on at Fairmarch, Sid. I won't go back there to live myself. There's something, I don't know . . . You wouldn't like it, and I wouldn't want you to get involved in it. But perhaps some day we'll go back for a visit."

That was the time she had told him about the accidental death of another brother, a couple years older than Tommy, a death that seemed to be shrouded in mystery, for some reason. She had seemed somehow ashamed of it, and it haunted her. Obviously it concerned a family secret which she regretted having mentioned, even to him.

THE BARBER was somewhat more willing to talk about Price Fariday. In reply to Conister's questions he admitted:

"He ain't too well liked in this country, but people are mighty careful not to cross him. I doubt there's a faster gun in Arizona. Not a bad hombre either, when he's sober, but when he's got a whisky jag on he's hell-fire and dynamite on the hoof. A good cattleman, though; one of the best. Takes after his old man that way, I reckon. And good-looking—too damn good-looking. Like a big thoroughbred with a mean bronco streak crossed in him. It's a sin the way the womenfolks go for that Fariday, and mostly he treats 'em like the dirt under his feet."

Bathed, barbered, dressed in clean new clothes from the skin out, Conister and Razee felt vastly refreshed and rejuvinated, glowing with health and good spirits, and a sense of almost luxuriant well-being. After a couple of drinks, they bought a bottle and located a fairly cool, comfortable room over the large adobe stage station.

There they settled down to relax, rest, and let the afternoon burn itself out, before going out to supper. They had enough money left for Razee to gamble with, and Conister said:

"Skill or luck, boy, whichever it is, you'd better win tonight and win heavy."

"If my luck holds we're all set," Razee said humbly.

They had a steak supper, to diverge from the Mexican diet, and afterward wandered into Congress Hall, the premier palace of pleasure and chance in Tucson. Rip Razee chose the dice table this evening, and his luck held very good indeed, so good that he quickly ran fifty dollars into five hundred and more.

The housemen politely suggested he try some of their other interesting games, but Rip stayed with the ivories until he hit a thousand. If they hadn't kept a limit on that table he might have broken the bank, he was that hot. But the limit was strict, and a thousand was sufficient for them and not enough to hurt the house any. Conister signaled Razee away from the velvet board. It didn't pay to win too much, the first time out in a new place, nor to take a chance on losing what was already gained.

They retired to a table in the elaborate barrom, and were drinking and smoking in leisurely comfort when a woman came out on the small raised platform nearby and began to sing *La Paloma,* in a rich

husky voice. She was a vivid brunette, but neither a Mexican nor breed, slim and shapely in a white satin gown, full-bosomed and strong-hipped, with a willowy waist.

And somehow familiar, Conister thought. Surely he had seen her somewhere. He knew those flashing black eyes, that proud nose and wide, gracious mouth.

Her aristocracy stood out in this garish smoke-filled room, with its polished mahogany and brass, its great mirrors and massive glistening crystal chandeliers. And suddenly Conister made the identification with amazement.

Janice Jefford, a friend of Iris' in Richmond! Another girl from a background of wealth and luxury who had volunteered for nursing duty. A Southern belle from an old and impeccable family, a flower of Southern aristocracy. And here she was singing a Spanish song in a frontier saloon!

The War, he thought. What it did to people! Some of those lovely young ladies he had known undoubtedly had been forced to darker depths than this, with their families and fortunes gone, their husbands of fiancés killed in battle.

JANICE had seen and recognized him by this time. When her song was finished she walked toward their table, straight and smiling and unashamed, as poised here as she had been in the magnificent ballrooms of Virginia. Conister rose and took her hand, presenting her to Razee, who bowed like a cavalier. She sat down with them, saying:

"A surprise, Sidney, and a most happy one."

"I couldn't believe my eyes at first, Jan," said Conister.

Jan Jefford laughed. "How the mighty have fallen! But what's a girl to do, Sid? Tremaine died at the Second Manassas, you know, and Sherman put Jefford Hall to the torch. The folks didn't want to live after that . . . What are you doing, Sidney?"

"Nothing. Drifting around. Rip here supports us. We live on his luck with cards and dice at various wheels and tables."

"Your money put us in business to begin with," Razee said.

Conister smiled. "The only sound investment I ever made. Will you have some wine, Janice?"

"Not wine, Sid," laughed the girl. "I've developed a taste for stronger drink. Just get me a glass and I'll have some of your whisky."

"Good girl," Conister said, signing to a waiter for another glass.

They chatted about old times and places and people, the sunny, carefree days before the war, hunts and races, parties and dances, boys who were dead and girls who had disappeared.

It all came back—the red-clay roads and somber pine woods, serene river valleys and fruit orchards and fields of cotton and tobacco, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Piedmont plains, Tidewater and the Atlantic shoreline. Stately white-pillared manor houses, music, laughter and mint juleps, honeysuckle and magnolia, rhododendron, dogwood, laurel and redbud, foaming cascades and cypress swamps. Tall handsome boys and lovely smiling girls, and great sleek thoroughbred horses.

A world that was ended, gone forever, torn asunder by war and laid in shattered reeking ruin, in the blackened cellars of Crown Manor, the debris and ashes of Jefford Hall.

Gradually, inevitably, the conversation reverted to the present and Arizona.

"Have you been out to Fairmarch, Sid?" asked Janice.

"No, but we met Norma in El Paso, and she rode up in the stage with us."

"She looks a lot like Iris, doesn't she?"

Conister nodded, and the girl went on, "You haven't met the incomparable Fariday then? I hear he's in town on one of his periodic sprees. A madman when in his cups, Sid, absolutely mad."

"A wonder somebody doesn't cut him down."

"Nobody dares to, I guess. But you'll like Bee Belknap, Sid." She spoke as if

he shouldn't like either Fariday or Norma March. "And old Hank Dittrich. Oh, you've already met old Hank?"

"Did Iris ever tell you how her brother died?" inquired Conister, wondering at himself for putting that question, yet knowing it had been nagging at the back of his mind for years.

"Why, yes. He was drowned. Iris was with him at the time, and she always blamed herself. Seemed to think she should have saved him. There's a damned up swimming pool on Fairmarch. It happened there."

"I see," Conister said thoughtfully. "I know she never wanted to talk about it much."

The leader of the small orchestra signaled to Janice Jefford, and she smiled and nodded to him, excusing herself to go and sing another number.

CONISTER noticed something about the way the leader watched Janice, as if she were a bright and precious light that obscured everything else. He was a tall, thin young man with a sleek blond head, and sad eyes set deep in a mournful sharp-featured face. He looked clean and boyish and unhappy, watching the girl with a kind of humble, hopeless devotion.

"He's in love with her," Rip Razee said casually. "And shes in love with you. Sid."

"You're crazy, Rip."

"Like a fox," said Razee. "I know all about who loves who, Sid. Maybe because nobody ever loved me, and I never loved any woman but my mother."

As the song started, a ripple of excitement stirred the smoke-layered air, and heads turned toward the entrance. A tall, dark young man was striding into Congress Hall, his figure a perfect blend of grace and power, his face sculptured in clean strong lines of incredible and rather satanic beauty.

Price Fariday! Conister knew that at once. It couldn't be anyone else. And he was drunk in a cold, vicious, controlled way, drunk and looking for trouble, definitely on the prod.

CHAPTER IV

Bare Fists and Raw Hate

PRICE FARIDAY was given plenty of room on his arrogant way to the bar, but even so he found it necessary to elbow and shoulder a few laggard inebriates from his path. The bartenders, bouncers, and other housemen looked worried and tense. Jan Jefford's singing voice seemed to falter momentarily. Sid Conister felt an instinctive revulsion and hatred for the big domineering man at the bar.

Fariday downed a double whisky and turned to the stage, crisp black curls spilling on his forehead from under his pushed-back hat. His face lighted when he saw the girl in the white satin gown, and he started instantly toward her. A hulking bouncer moved tentatively to intercept him, but fell back under Fariday's menacing glare.

Swaggering to the stage, Fariday reached for Janice Jefford. She broke off in the middle of the chorus. The band leader was up then, clutching at Fariday's arm. Fariday turned and swung with sudden speed and power, smashing his big fist full against that keen pale face.

The blond head bobbed, the lanky form flying after it. Legs in the air, the musician slid on his back across the polished hardwood, upsetting chairs and a table with a splintering crash of glassware. He lay still and senseless amid the overturned furniture.

Price Fariday laughed and wheeled back at the girl.

Conister came upright with his gun drawn and leveled, speaking as he walked toward the raised platform.

"Far enough, mister. Get back where you belong." His tone was quiet but penetrating. Fariday whirled on him with a sneer. "A brave man! A big brave man with a big gun! Who the hell are *you*, stranger?"

Conister said nothing, but the hammer

of the Colt clicked back under his thumb.

"Why don't you shoot?" jeered Fariday. "It's the best chance you'll ever have, man.'

"I'd be doing Tucson a favor," Conister drawled. "But when I shoot you, it'll be from an even break."

"Leather that iron and let's have it right now," Fariday said.

Conister motioned with the barrel. "Back off and shut up. I'll make the terms this time."

Fariday laughed. "How about bare hands, if you haven't got the stomach for guns?"

Red raging hate blazed up in Conister, burning away reason and judgment.

"All right,' he said. "Take off your belt."

Janice fled to Razee, pleading with him to stop this before Sid got crippled or killed. The bouncers closed in, and Fariday hesitated, hands at his belt buckle.

"Don't interfere, boys," he warned, pointing at the kerosene footlamps. "Stand along there and catch him when he falls. That way it won't break up any furnishings."

Stripped of gun-belts and coats, they faced one another on the bright-lighted platform. Fariday was two inches taller than Conister's six-foot-one, and perhaps twenty pounds heavier than Sid's one-ninety weight.

They circled, sparring and feinting. Suddenly Fariday lashed out with a left that mashed Conister's mouth and drove his coppery head back. But Fariday missed with the right, and Conister was inside drilling both hands into the man's waistline. Fariday grunted and dropped back, his mouth sagging open, pain in his eyes.

They met squarely, slugging and panting, slashing savagely away at faces and heads, and now both were bleeding from nose and mouth, and their fists and forearms were spattered with scarlet. Both could hit, and it was pretty even as they lurched back and forth, giving and taking in cold, reckless fury. There was a hatred between them, the lust to kill and obliterate, as if they were lifelong enemies. Conister knew a fierce exultation every time he landed solidly and felt the jarring shocks tingle up his arm.

BUT the pace was a killing one. Both men soon were badly beaten, sobbing for breath, arm-weary, and on leaden legs.

Then Fariday came in a sudden lunging charge. Conister ripped him, right and left, tearing the handsome face and jolting the black head. But Fariday kept on bulling in, taking the punishment in order to grapple with his opponent.

They clinched and spun dizzily, interlocked and straining, snarling through the sweat and blood, and in that brutal embrace Conister felt the superior crushing strength of the larger man. An explosive burst freed Sid briefly, to stab and rake Fariday half-blind. But Price closed in and caught him again.

They went down thrashing and tumbling, heaving and rolling in the lamp light glare. The floor slammed Conister's skull, half stunning and sickening him—and the advantage was all Fariday's now. Using his weight and power, fists and elbows, hips and knees, Fariday mauled Sid Conister into the hardwood boards without mercy.

It was elemental, primitive, two jungle beasts striving to tear and rend, break and cripple and mutilate one another. The onlookers were awed by the savagery of it. Women hid their faces, and men shuddered.

Conister got his knees up and lashed out with both legs, kicking Fariday off, but Sid was scarcely on his feet when Price came ramming into him like a maddened wild boar. They toppled over the lamps and fell crashing into the orchestra pit, Conister on the bottom, the last gasp of air crushed from his lungs. Floundering and threshing about the floor in a berserk brawl, they splintered chairs and upended stools and shattered instruments, under a fluttering shower of sheet music.

But Conister was spent, exhausted, the strength and resistance draining from him like the water from a broken jug. Fariday

was hammering his face and head against the planks with terrible sledging blows. With a final ultimate effort, Conister flung that relentless bulk off and rolled clear, but he lacked the energy to rise beyond his hands and knees in the wreckage.

Price Fariday, on the verge of collapse himself, was lurching forward to kick at Sid's bowed head, when Rip Razee spoke sharply over his lined gun barrel.

"That's enough, big boy! Lay off or I'll let you have it!"

Fariday drew up, staggering, shaking his sweat-curled black head, pawing at his bloody eyes with raw-knuckled hands.

"That's right, Price," growled the head bouncer, his own gun out. "If he don't plug you, I will! Get out of here now, Fariday, and don't come back. And don't forget you're paying for all the damage."

"I'll pay,' mumbled Fariday, seeming strangely subdued all at once, as if combat had sobered him and restored his sanity. "Send the bill to Fairmarch."

Groping blindly he found his gun-belt on top of the piano, and stumbled away toward the swing-doors with the holstered gun dangling from his hand. The crowd made way for him, and Price Fariday weaved outside into the night.

Conister was upright now, swabbing his crimsoned face and cropped coppery head with a wet towel someone had thrust at him. Razee was still holding his gun and watching the batwings through which Fariday had vanished. And Janice Jefford stood by, clinging to the arm of the orchestra leader and staring anxiously at Conister.

She introduced the musician as her friend and manager, Silk Vondren, and Conister liked the shy, sad-faced young musician at once. He'd had guts, too, to challenge Fariday, even if he had ended up a one-punch victim.

"I'm all right, Jan," Conister assured the distraught girl. "No broken bones, no permanent damage. Nothing hurt much—except my pride and ego."

RAZEE sheathed his gun. "You fought him even, Sid," he protested.

"Not quite, Rip," said Conister, smiling painfully with pulped swollen lips. "I guess I'll use a gun on him next time." He applied a fresh soaked towel to his gashed eyebrow and raw, welted cheekbones, to his swelling, scraped nose, lacerated mouth, and lumped jaws. His new shirt hung in bloody shreds, the new trousers were torn and dirty. "Clothes don't last me long, Rip," he panted slowly. "Good thing the dice were for you tonight, boy."

They returned to their table, with Silk Vondren joining them, while the place quieted down and the swampers cleaned up the debris of battle. Cash Horween, the owner, came over to shake Conister's hand and tear up the bill that had accrued to date.

"Everything's on the house for you folks," he declared expansively. "I've been waiting a long time to see somebody take that Fariday."

"I didn't exactly take him," Conister said ruefully.

"You did good enough, plenty good enough. Price won't get over that for quite a spell, Conister. Now drink and eat hearty, friends. The sky's the limit."

"It'll be beer for me, after that fracas," Conister grinned. He needed cool beer to ease his scorching-dry throat.

"Well, come back again when you're in a mood for whisky," offered Cash Horween. "It'll be on the house, Conister."

After a few rounds, Conister and Razee said good night to Janice Jefford and Vondren, and left Congress Hall to return to their room above the stage depot.

"Now there's a real fine girl, that Janice," said Razee.

"She sure is," Conister agreed, but without any intense interest.

Razee glanced at him, and wagged his lean, narrow head in mute disgust.

In the morning they were awakened by someone knocking at the door. When Razee opened up old Hank Dittrich was standing there, grief and anger mingled in his faded squinting eyes and seamed leathery face. Coming inside, he peered at Conister's battered features.

"So it *was* you," he said. "He don't look any worse'n you do, but he sure looks just as bad. Must of been quite a ruckus. Wish I could of seen it myself. You'll have to kill him now, friend, or he'll be killing you."

"I expect to kill him, sooner or later, Hank," said Conister. "Pour yourself a drink and take a chair."

"Reckon I can stand a drink all right," Dittrich said. "I got bad news, boys. You never knew Bee Belknap, but she was a great old lady. Real pioneer frontier American stock, like old King March himself. Well, boys, she's dead now." He drained the glass, refilled it, and sank into a chair.

"Dead?" muttered Conister. "What happened, Hank?"

"Accident," Dittrich said. "It's always an accident on Fairmarch. Had a heart attack and fell downstairs, they claim. But I'll swear her heart was as strong as you young fellers' hearts be. They always made out Bee was sickly, but she was as tough as a bronc."

"What do you mean, Hank, its always an accident on Fairmarch."

"I don't generally talk so free and easy," Dittrich said. "But I took to you boys the minute I seen you get off that stage yesterday, and an old man can't keep everything bottled up inside him forever. What I mean is—they's something rotten on Fairmarch, so rotten it smells enough to make a buzzard sick! Always has been."

CHAPTER V

A Deadly Game

CONISTER propped himself up on one elbow, feeling as if he had been beaten with a club from head to foot. But what this old man was saying was giving him the shock of his life.

"What is it, Hank?" he asked. "Or who is it?"

"I ain't got any proof of anything," old Dittrich grumbled morosely. "But I been there a long while and I seen things happen. There was that little Mex girl first. Said she was thrown off a horse, but we all knowed she was *knocked* off. Then young Payson March got drownded, in a pool he'd swum in ever since he was big enough to walk. Then the old King himself got bushwhacked on his own spread. And now Bee Belknap. Only one they called murder was when King March got it, but if you ask me, they was all murders."

"Did King March and old man Fariday have trouble?" asked Conister.

"I don't believe it, though there was a heap of talk. Some say the King got Fariday drunk and bought him out for practically nothing. Price holds with that story, and he still thinks Fairmarch oughta be half his. And he won't let up until it's all his, one way or another. He's got Norma under his thumb, but he never buffaloed old lady Belknap any. I rode with the King many a year, boys, and I know he'd never doublecross a pardner."

"Did anybody see Mrs. Belknap fall down the stairs?"

"Norma was with her, tried to catch her but couldn't. Fariday was down at the bottom. She was dead before she got to him."

"Who was riding with the Mexican girl, Hank?"

"Miss Iris and Miss Norma. That was a long ways back, Conister."

"And Iris was swimming with her brother Payson," said Conister. "You don't think Iris drowned him deliberately, Hank?"

The squinty bleached eyes widened in the old man's furrowed brown face. "You got that all wrong! It was Norma swimming with the boy. Miss Iris let on it was her, on account of so much talk about Norma killing that little Mex gal. Figured they was having too many accidents, with Norma mixed up in all of 'em, I reckon. That Norma's got a temper. She goes plumb out of her head when she gets mad. I seen her quirt cowboys and kitchen help, and once she took a double-barreled shot-

gun to a dog that snapped at her."

Rip Razee got up, poured himself a drink and refilled Hank Dittrich's glass.

"See what I told you, Sid? Or wanted to tell you, but didn't quite dare to."

"I'm beginning to, Rip," Conister said gravely, swinging his long legs out of bed and groaning softly.

"That gives you full control of the estate, don't it?" Razee said.

"I suppose so," Conister admitted gloomily.

"Which means," Hank Dittrich said, "that you're the next one to die, Sid Conister.

The following day Conister and Razee hired horses from the livery barn and rode out of Tucson to the funeral on Fairmarch. Conister felt as if he'd lost a friend and ally, although he'd never even seen Aunt Bee Belknap.

The layout on the Santa Cruz, northwest of town, was even larger and more elaborate than Conister had anticipated. The yard today was crammed with a vast variety of wagons, rigs, and many-colored horses, both harnessed and saddled. The ranch house was a great rambling structure of fieldstone and logs, with a long roofed gallery across the front. The long low bunkhouse, cookshack, and huge barn were built of adobe blocks, while sheds and outbuildings were of both adobe and wood.

Fairmarch maintained its own blacksmith and saddle shops, a commissary providing general merchandise, and there were two rows of cabins for employees with families. The stout corrals were well-constructed and filled with fine horses. The entire spread was in immaculate condition. It was like a town in itself.

NORMA MARCH'S welcome was perfunctory, absent-minded. Conister could see only small traces of grief in her, and those of dubious quality.

"You're administrator now, Sid," she said, "so you'll have to stay here. Sometimes I think there's an evil cloud over Fairmarch. It's always been a place marked with tragedy."

But the real grief and sense of loss, Conister noted, was plain in the eyes and faces of cowhands, domestic help, and neighboring families, as well as a number of prominent citizens from Tucson.

Price Fariday's greeting astounded him, however. The man came forward to shake hands at once.

"Sorry about the other night, Conister," he said frankly. "Reckon I never should touch whisky at all. Hope there's no hard feelings—it was about an even draw, I'd say. I'm mighty glad you're here, Conister. I know cattle, horses and men, but I'm not up in business, like Mrs. Belknap was. I depended a lot on her, and from now on I hope I can rely on you to handle the bookkeeping and keep the accounts straight. I never was much good at figures and financial matters."

He smiled in friendly fashion. His features like Conister's, still bore the abrasions and scars of battle. Price Fariday had a lot of charm, when he wanted to use it—no question about that. He was like another man altogether today.

Conister replied, with more restraint and brevity, and they parted amicably enough, but Conister had a feeling that Fariday was playing some sort of deep rôle. The man had seemed convincingly sincere, but Conister knew he would always doubt that sincerity. Fariday was an accomplished actor, he decided.

A short, dapper man with pomaded hair and a neat waxed mustache came up and introduced himself as George Hano, attorney for the Marches and Fairmarch.

"Please drop into my office at your convenience, Mr. Conister," he said suavely. "We have a great deal to discuss. Mrs. Belknap told me she was writing you a letter, but I haven't been able to find one as yet. It'll probably turn up, after the confusion is ended."

The service was mercifully short. When Conister and Razee stood before the coffin, they looked down at a large buxom woman with white hair in contrast to the ruddy darkness of her broad, rugged, almost Indian-looking face. But in it there had been character, courage, strength

and understanding. Conister wished he could have known Bee Belknap, and again felt a sense of personal loss and bereavement.

Observing that Price Fariday seemed always to be attended by two harsh-featured, cold-eyed men, evidently Fairmarch riders, Conister questioned a nearby rancher as to their identity.

"A couple of hardcases, we figure," the cattleman whispered, eying them with open disapproval. "More gunhands than cowhands, I'd allow, mister. The tall stringy one is Trig Thaxter. The short dumpy jasper's Hob Musgrove. King March never would've had them two in his bunkhouse."

Bee Belknap was laid to rest in the family burial ground behind the ranch, along with her brother, the King, his wife, their son Payson, and other relatives. For some reason Conister felt glad that Iris wasn't here. She'd rest better among those who had fallen in the Seven Days Battle before Richmond.

He was turning away when he glimpsed a small slab in a far corner of the stone-walled lot. It was inscribed with a foreign name:

Carmelita Jaurez, 1841-55.

That must have been the little Mexican girl who was killed in a fall from a horse. He wondered why she had been included in this select family group. Guilt or something there, perhaps.

THAT night Conister and Razee were smoking cigars before the library fireplace, lounging deeply at ease in the great leather chairs, when Norma March entered. She asked Sid if he'd care to take a stroll with her.

As they went out Razee drawled, "Watch yourself, boy."

Consiter grinned, but Norma flashed a look of intensive dislike in Razee's direction.

Outside, she said, "I don't like your friend Razee. He's coarse, vulgar and uncouth, Sid. How can a gentleman like you put up with him?"

"I like him," Conister said simply. "He's the best friend I've got, Norma."

"Well, if we want you, Sid, I suppose we'll have to accept him, too. And we need you now, Sid." She clung tight to his arm, as they walked along an irrigation ditch toward the Santa Cruz, flowing moondappled in its screen of willows and cottonwoods and salt cedars.

"I'm so alone, Sid, so awfully alone," she murmured despairingly. "I need someone—someone like you, Sid. Strong and wise, patient and gentle, calm and sure."

Conister found himself mellowing and softening, in spite of his black suspicions. She was so much like Iris, moving with the same flawless ease, slender but fully and firmly rounded, with lush curves and depths of breast. All woman, fragrant with the same scent Iris had worn, her classic features almost identical with those of her dead sister.

Conister had tasted her lips in Apache Pass, and he wanted them again. Drawing her close he bent and kissed her. Norma responded with her lips and arms, her body firm and vibrant against his rangy frame. Desire flooded them for a timeless interval. Then Norma broke away with a small breathless cry, and they went on under the leafy boughs toward the river bank.

Conister had felt her withdrawal before she freed herself from the embrace. It was as if the thought of another man had intervened, tangible and chilling. She was playing a part, as had Fariday that afternoon.

But why? Because he was administrator of the estate, the manager of Fairmarch, virtually the owner until Tommy came of age?

"What do you hear from the kid, Tommy?" he asked Norma.

"Not much," she said disinterestedly. "He'll be coming home soon. Unless he takes a cruise or something. He doesn't like it here. He'll like it less with Aunt Bee gone."

"Why doesn't he like Fairmarch?"

"How do I know? He's just a kid."

"Who's the Mexican girl buried in the family lot?" asked Conister.

Norma turned on him, her face frozen, her eyes like black liquid fire. "Must you start prying already? You aren't really the head of the family, you know. You're neither a March, nor a Fariday!"

"Fariday wants this ranch, doesn't he?"

"Why shouldn't he?" Norma flared. "His father founded it and owned half of it—until he was cheated out of it. And Price has built it up, year after year, made it what it is today."

"You really think the King, your father, cheated his partner?"

"I know he did! He was absolutely ruthless. He—" She stopped and stared accusingly at him. "Who've you been talking to, Sid Conister?"

"Nobody—since Iris," Conister said softly.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I almost forgot, Sid. Of course she told you about Fairmarch and the family—and things. What did she say about me?"

"Not much. Except that you were lovely."

"She never liked me," Norma said brokenly. "She—she actually hated me, I think. My own sister, Sid, and she despised me!"

Conister shook his head. "I'm sure she didn't, Norma."

"Well, it doesn't make much difference now. She's—uh—gone. And we're here, Sid . . . Isn't the river nice in the moonlight?"

Conister nodded.

CHAPTER VI

Voice From the Grave

WATCHING the moon fling a jagged shivered lance of silvery light across the rippling surface of the Santa Cruz, Sid Conister was conscious that there was a vague hollow threat of some kind in the night. He felt his spine prickle coldly, felt his scalp creep tight and bristling.

Must be my morbid imagination, he thought, glancing around at the shadowy trees. He and Norma were quite alone at the river side. A hunting nighthawk wailed, an owl hooted in fright. Far away on the prairie, coyotes yipped, and wolves bayed at the lofty moon. Closer by, insects hummed in the still balmy air, frogs chorused shrilly from the marshes, and crickets chirped thinly in the bunchgrass and sage.

"What's that floating near the shore, Sid?" asked Norma, pointing.

"Just a chip, I guess."

"Get it, Sid. I want to make a wish and launch it on the water, like we used to do when we were children."

Conister obediently stepped forward toward the edge of the stream. He was stooping to reach the bobbing fragment of wood, when lead whipped past his head and geysered water in a high sparkling spray of silver at midstream. The report went crashing and echoing away through the trees.

Swiveling about in his crouch, Conister's right hand leaped to his hips and came up with his Colt .44. His thumb was working the hammer as the barrel came level and in line with the fading trace of muzzle-light under the cottonwoods. The blast of his gun came hard on the heels of the other, waking a new series of diminishing echoes. A man grunted and reeled in the darkness, there was a crackle of brush as Conister's gun sprang up against his palm and wrist.

Another loud blare issued from the woods, aimless and down-slanted this time, the flame illuminating the squat hunched form and shocked fleshy face of Hob Musgrove, who had been beaten back and was sagging against a cottonwood bole. Conister threw down from the recoil and fired once more, his blazing Colt lifting his arm.

Musgrove coughed and moaned, a choked strangling sound. Then the dead weight of his body rasped down the bark

and thudded to earth.

Conister moved away from the light background of the water and waited, motionless and alert, gun cocked and poised in his hand. There was nothing but stillness, faintly invaded by sounds of small nightlife.

With a cold, quick glance at the girl, who was standing stark and statuelike, Conister strode forward, shifting the gun to his left hand and flicking a match alight on his right thumbnail. Hob Musgrove had turned to hug the tree as he slipped down it, and he knelt now with his thick arms still around the trunk, shaggy head drooping, fat-jowled face pressed against the cottonwood bark.

Conister walked back to the girl. "It didn't quite work, Norma. I suppose Thaxter will try it next. And then Price Fariday—or maybe you."

"What on earth are you talking about, Sid? My God, you don't think I—" She gestured in utter desolation.

"Why would you say Musgrove tried to kill me, Norma?"

"Because you fought with Price, of course. He worships Price Fariday. And you hurt him, Sid, hurt him bad." She was earnest, desperate.

Conister laughed softly, without mirth. "He hurt me some, too. Well, let's get back to the house before somebody else takes a shot at us."

On the way back, Conister glanced down at her. "Ever kill anybody, Norma?"

"Yes," she said surprisingly. "But not intentionally, Sid."

"Who was it?"

"Carmelita Jaurez," said Norma, without hesitation, amazing him all over again. "We were racing our horses, just kids, and I crowded her. She—she fell off, landed on some boulders, and was killed."

CONISTER was impressed, in spite of himself. It could have happened like that. An accident. And Musgrove could have been after him tonight because he'd cut and marked Fariday up in a fight. But it wasn't too likely. Musgrove was probably just earning his wages, doing one of the jobs in which he specialized.

"How about your brother Payson?" inquired Conister.

"What do you mean?" She was highly outraged. "Did Iris try to put that off on me, too? I wasn't with Payson when he drowned. It was Iris, you fool!"

"I just wondered," he said mildly. "Iris never said much about it."

"No, she wouldn't! But she told you all about Carmelita and me!"

Conister smiled in the darkness. Iris had never mentioned Carmelita Jaurez to him. But Norma thought he knew about it, and so she'd turned suddenly frank and honest with him. It didn't mean a thing, didn't redeem her in the least.

Halfway back along the irrigation canal, they met Rip Razee, Price Fariday, Trig Thaxter, and some of the riders from the bunkhouse. Conister told them what had taken place on the river bank.

"I can't understand that," Fariday said, shaking his handsome head in exasperation. "Musgrove must've been drunk. I told him to lay off that Taos lightning tonight."

"He was hitting it pretty heavy," Trig Thaxter said sadly.

"I'm sorry this happened, Conister," said Fariday.

"Well, he missed me anyway," Conister said cheerfully. "But I couldn't afford to miss him."

Fariday and his men went on to pick up Musgrove's body, and Razee turned back toward the ranch house with Conister and Norma March.

"I believe I'll have to chaperone your moonlight walks hereafter," Razee said. "Things sure happen thick and fast on this spread."

Norma eyed him with distaste. "Perhaps there won't be any more moonlight walks."

"Now that's a real good sensible idea," Razee said soberly.

In the house Norma excused herself and went upstairs immediately, telling them to be comfortable and at home, and to help themselves to anything they cared

to drink. Razee poured generous drinks of rare old brandy from a hammered-silver decanter.

"It don't take long to figure this setup out," he murmured. "Either we kill them, or they kill us, Sid. Old Hank had it all doped out right."

"I guess so, Rip," Conister wearily agreed. "This ranch is an obsession with Fariday. He'd do anything, kill anybody, to get control of it. And he's got Norma under some kind of a spell, turned her against her own family.

Razee snorted softly. "She's as bad as he is, Sid, bad all the way through. If she didn't look so much like Iris you'd see it, too.

"Maybe, Rip, maybe. But it's hard to believe Iris could have a vicious sister like that."

"It happens, Sid," said Razee gently. "Happens in the best of families, they say. Norma and Fariday are in this together, boy. They got rid of the oldest son and old King himself, and the war took care of Iris. They didn't want old lady Belknap to meet you, Sid, so they took care of her. You're next on the list—and then young Tommy. You want anything plainer than that?"

Conister shuddered slightly. "It's still difficult to accept, Rip. A lovely girl like Norma."

"She's a tigress," Razee said. "When she gets mad there's murder right in her face and her eyes."

"What we going to do, Rip? How we going to get them out in the open and prove our suspicions?"

"Sit back and wait, Sid, play a pat hand," Razee told him. "They'll do the leading. They want us dead, and they don't like to waste time." Razee grinned, his thin, bony face sardonic, and moved to the decanter. "With brandy like this a man don't mind waiting around a little. Thought tequila had killed my taste, but I can still appreciate good liquor. The little things of life, Sid. Who wants to be hounded by ambition? Look at Norma and Fariday. Miserable, driven, ridden—and doomed."

THEY were in the spacious well-furnished bedroom to which they had been assigned, enjoying brandy nightcaps and final cigarettes, when someone tapped lightly on the door panel. Gun in hand Razee answered it, admitting a slim young Mexican houseboy with somber Castilian features and tragic dark eyes.

Gesturing for silence, the Mexican whispered, "You are wise to draw the gun first in this house, señor. I have a letter for you from the old lady who died. There were those who would keep it from you, but I found it by chance. If it is known, I will die, but I gladly risk that. It would be worth it, if I could help clear this house of evil."

"Thank you, son," Conister said, taking the envelope. "Do you mind telling us your name?"

"I am Joaquin Jaurez," the boy said, with quiet pride and dignity.

"Carmelita's brother?"

"That is right, señor."

"You know how your sister died, Joaquin?"

"She was pushed from her horse into a pile of rocks," Jaurez said. "Miss Norma did not like it that she was losing the race."

"And Payson March?" pursued Conister.

"I think you will find answers to everything in that letter, señor. I will leave you now. May you sleep well—but lightly."

"Thanks again, Joaquin. We're your friends, you know."

"I am glad," Joaquin Jaurez said simply. "I may need friends here before long."

He withdrew noiselessly, and Conister opened the envelope. The letter was penned in a stiff, angular hand, strong and forthright like Bee Belknap herself. Conister read swiftly:

> I never saw you but I know you must be a good man or Iris wouldn't have married you. The Marches were a fine family—except for one. I will be short and you can depend that this is Gospel true. I expect to die any time now—by accident, of course. I had hoped you might come West in time, but I guess it's not to be.
>
> Norma March killed Carmelita Jaurez by

throwing her off a horse. The Mexican girl was winning the race and it made Norma mad. When she's mad she is insane. Norma drowned her brother Payson in the swimming pool because he was teasing and plaguing her. Iris tried to take the blame, because people were talking about Norma already.

Price Fariday shot and killed my brother King March from ambush, after King bought out Price's father. I have no proof or evidence to stand up in a court of law, but I know the facts and this is God's Own Truth.

When I die it will be at the hands of Norma or Price or both. If you come to Fairmarch they will try to kill you, and they will surely kill poor little Tommy before he's old enough to take over here. They will stop at nothing to gain full possession of this ranch.

When you get this I may be with Iris and King and Payson, and you can know I was murdered like the others. I hope you come in time to save Tommy, and find a good girl who has been waiting for you in Tucson. A friend of Iris, and as fine a girl as Iris was. Goodby, and God bless you.

Sid Conister handed the sheet to Razee. "There it is, Rip. I guess I have to be hit over the head before anything sinks into my thick skull."

He paced to the wall where his gun belt was hanging and ripped it off the hook.

"Where you going, Sid?" asked Razee, looking up from the letter.

"Let's get it over with right now," Conister said. "Fariday and Thaxter sleep in the big house here. They'll be coming back."

"Now you're talking like the old Cap'n Conister himself!" Razee said, with a crooked, happy grin. "Let's go down and take 'em."

Conister buckled his belt and tied the holster bottom to his right leg. "We'll take 'em. Anything as rotten as that has got to be wiped out. The sooner the better Rip."

"And the girl, Sid?" Razee was strapping his own gun on now.

"The girl, too, if she gets in the way," Conister said, his white teeth on edge. "You had her tagged, Rip. She's the worst of the lot."

Rip Razee chortled. "For a man that ain't a great lover, I can sure tag 'em, Sid! See what Mrs. Belknap said about that Janice gal in Tucson?"

"I still can't believe that part of it."

"Why not?" Razee said. "You got a fatal charm, Sid. But I'm the boy that knows women."

CHAPTER VII

Full Payment

THE upper hallway was dimly lighted by a single wall-bracketed lamp when Conister and Rip Razee left the room and moved quietly to the head of the stairs. The lower hall was dim and shadowed, too, but the sitting room and library beyond were aglow with lamps. The sound of voices came from the library, where no doubt Fariday and Thaxter were sampling the liquor.

This was as good a time as any, and the odds were even. After reading Bee Belknap's letter, Conister felt that he couldn't rest or sleep until Price Fariday had paid for his crimes, and Norma March at least realized her murderous campaign was ended.

They were halfway down the stairs when Trig Thaxter, tall, lank and cadaverous, came whistling through the parlor into the hall and past the foot of the stairs, apparently bound for the rear of the house. Glancing up he saw them, gestured in casual greeting and continued on his way. Thaxter abruptly halted as if in afterthought. Something in their faces must have warned him. He wheeled back and squared off, facing the staircase, his sullen, loose-lipped mouth opening as if to call Fariday, then closing tightly on his broken, discolored teeth.

"What you want?" he finally blurted.

"You, for one thing," drawled Rip Razee. Whiplash thin and tough, he stood there on the landing, face bitter and scornful, arms hanging free and easy.

Trig Thaxter's knobby big hand blurred into action. He was quick, but Razee was seconds ahead of him, gun-barrel lined down on a slant and jerking as roaring

flames stabbed out of it. Struck twice and smashed back against the wall, Thaxter's weapon exploded into the carpet. Lurching sideward he tipped over a coat rack and hat tree. Stumbling over them, he lunged crazily forward and ran for the back door, staggering and blundering from side to side on spastic legs.

Razee vaulted lightly over the banister and landed catlike beside the shambling scarecrow figure. Gunwhipping viciously as he lit in a balanced crouch, he beat Thaxter face-down on the floor. With astonishing vitality, squirming, rolling and kicking, Thaxter thrashed into the baseboard and fired blindly upward.

The flash seared Razee's broken nose and eyebrows, it was that close. But Rip threw down then and blasted the long, bloody form against the floor boards. Trig Thaxter writhed in a spasm of agony, stiffened out rigid, and went slack and limp and dead.

Sid Conister had gone on down the stairs, and was standing at the bottom when Price Fariday emerged and stood facing him at about twenty feet. A smile was on his sculptured features, a mad reckless light in his black eyes.

"Well, what do you know?" he remarked casually.

"I know the whole story," Conister said. "I know that Norma killed the Mex girl, and drowned her own brother, and that you drygulched King March. And Norma pushed Bee Belknap down the stairs."

"Is that so?" Fariday laughed, with a toss of his curly head. "Maybe you don't know that Bee wasn't quite dead when she got to the bottom. I had to lend her a hand, Conister. Put her out of her misery. And now *you* want it, Rebel?"

"Get to it," Conister said, lean face and mouth twisting with contempt and utter loathing.

"Two of you?" Fariday nodded at Razee.

"One of us," Conister said. "This is mine, Rip."

"I ain't worried about you, Cap'n," drawled Razee. "Take the filthy scum."

Price Fariday's motion was a streak of fluid grace and speed, but Conister more than matched it. His gun flashed up and burst aflame a breath before Fariday's blossomed with red fire. Just enough so that Sid's slug slashed home solidly and in time to wrench Price's gunhand slightly out of line.

THE bullet chewed varnished wood from the newel-post at Conister's right shoulder. Fariday wallowed on splayed legs from the shock of the impact.

Flinging down from the recoil, Conister thumbed off another shot as his barrel fell into line, the muzzle blooming and moving thunderously within the walls. Rocked far back on his heels, Fariday's second shot spouted high toward the ceiling. A crystal chandelier shattered musically, and a bright rain of shimmering fragments fell on Conister's coppery red head and tinkled to the floor.

Price Fariday, with two .44 bullets in him, was dying on his feet now, but still straining to bring his gun to bear and fight back. Rotten evil as he might be, the man had courage, and was a fighter to the finish. But his muscles would no longer respond, his spraddled legs were melting beneath him, his dark eyes were becoming glazed and fixed.

With a disgusted curse Price Fariday heaved himself up and forward, fired blindly into the floor at Conister's feet. Splinters sprayed Sid's boots, and Fariday toppled headlong over a chair, the weight of his splendid body jarring the house.

Scrambling spasmodically to all fours, refusing to die even then, and trying to lift his gun with both hands, Fariday had it rising from the floor when Sid Conister slammed a final slug into his chest. Gagging, retching a gush of scarlet, Fariday lunged forward and lay still in a spreading ragged pool of blood.

"He sure died hard," Razee said. "And so did Thaxter."

"Too hard," Conister mumbled, shaking his cropped sweaty head and blinking

perspiration from his gray eyes.

Then a voice from above froze them booth in their tracks, a woman's voice, triumphant and gloating, and a bit mad.

"Drop those guns and don't move! This shotgun'll blow you both to hell! It's my turn now!"

They dropped their guns and raised their eyes in slow wonder. Norma March was standing at the head of the stairway, a double-barreled shotgun resting on the rail, down-tilted to cover them. She wore a pink silk nightgown, her chestnut hair streaming and shimmering over her lovely bare shoulders, but there was nothing lovely about her face and eyes. Nothing there but madness and murder, and a lust for power.

"So you killed Price. All right! I don't need him. I don't need anybody! Just myself, see? Just Norma March!"

"We'd better talk this over, Norma," said Conister. "Maybe you can still save yourself."

"Save myself?" she mocked, with an hysterical laugh. "You're the ones who need saving! I'll own Fairmarch, all alone. I'll *be* Fairmarch, and the richest woman in Arizona! The time for talking is gone. This is a time for killing. Are you ready to die, you broken-down Confederate tramps?"

She's about ready to pull trigger, Conister thought. The same gun she used on that dog probably. If we dive apart maybe she won't get both of us, not too bad anyway.

A slight dark form appeared in the upper hallway at Norma's back, a silent shadow creeping up on her. Joaquin Jaurez, a knife raised in his hand, dully agleam in the dimness. He struck with sudden savage hate.

Norma March screamed and surged forward across the railing, blue eyes bulging horribly, finger contracting on the twin triggers. The tremendous bellowing blast of both barrels thundered into the ceiling, bringing another hailstorm of crystal pendants and sparkling shards of glass.

The shotgun fell the twenty-odd feet to the floor, and Norma followed it in a wild headlong sprawl, striking with a sodden sickening smash.

SHE lay there half-naked in the faint lamplight, the shaft of the knife protruding from between her flawless white shoulders.

"I had to do it, señors," Joaquin Jaurez said from aloft. "I regret it very much, but it had to be done."

"It certainly did, son," said Conister. "You needn't apologize for saving our lives, Joaquin."

There came a loud urgent hammering at the front door, and Conister, picking up his gun, went to aswer it. Razee trailed him, Colt cocked and ready. Janice Jefford stood on the porch, her eyes wide and fearful. Her face lighted at the sight of Conister.

With her were Silk Vondren and a large portly man with a sheriff's badge on his leather vest. Janice introduced him as Sheriff Sloan.

"I had a letter from Bee Belknap," she explained, "and I took it to the sheriff. With what he'd heard through the years, he decided he had enough to arrest Norma March and Price Fariday."

"You're a little late for that, Sheriff," said Conister. "They're both dead in there. Go ahead in, and Rip'll tell you about it. Jan, you better not go inside."

"Heard the shooting," Sloan said. "Glad it's them instead of you two. Figured we was too late, but it don't matter as long as they're dead. Saves time and money for the Territory, too."

The sheriff stepped inside, and Vondren followed him, smiling shyly and saying something to Janice and Conister about he knew they'd rather be alone.

"I'm so happy to find you all right, Sid!" Janice said when the door had closed on the others. "I was terribly afraid, after I got Bee's letter."

"I got one from her, too," Conister said. "That's what brought this shooting on tonight."

"Did you—have to kill Norma? Yourself, I mean."

"No, Jan. A boy named Joaquin Jaurez took care of that. Carmelita's brother, you know."

"That's almost poetic justice, isn't it? Did Bee—say anything about me in your letter, Sidney?"

Conister smiled down at her. "Well, she mentioned some fine girl in Tucson who'd been out here waiting for me. I didn't put any stock in it, of course."

"But it's the truth, Sid," said Janice. "I've been out here two years, waiting for you, I knew you'd get here eventually, and I couldn't think of any other way to find you. What else do you think would keep me in a place like Congress Hall in a town like Tucson for two whole years, Sidney?"

Conister looked at her with a tenderness that was almost reverence. "I don't deserve it, Janice. And I'm surely not worth it."

She laughed in soft, tremulous delight. "Let me be the judge of that, Sidney. If you don't measure up, I can always go back to the Congress."

"Well this place is going to need a woman's hand, Jan."

"It's yours now, Sid? I'm so tired of earning my own living."

"I guess it's mine, until Tommy's twenty-one," he admitted, a little uneasily.

Janice moved closer against him. "I'll take the job, Sid—if it's open and you're offering it. Am I a shameless Georgia hussy, though!"

"There's a few strings on it," Conister drawled. "Like making it legal and proper, you know. I was raised real strict in Virginia."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in mock disappointment. "I was hoping we'd live—shall I say, outside the law?—for a few years, at least. But if you insist, Captain Conister—"

He bent and placed his lips on hers, holding her firmly. Powder-reek evaporated before her clean fragrance, and the night was suddenly filled with rare shimmering beauty and ethereal music.

"I do, Jan," murmured Sid Conister tenderly.

"This'll make Aunt Bee Belknap happy—wherever she is," Janice said softly. "And I don't mind it too much myself."

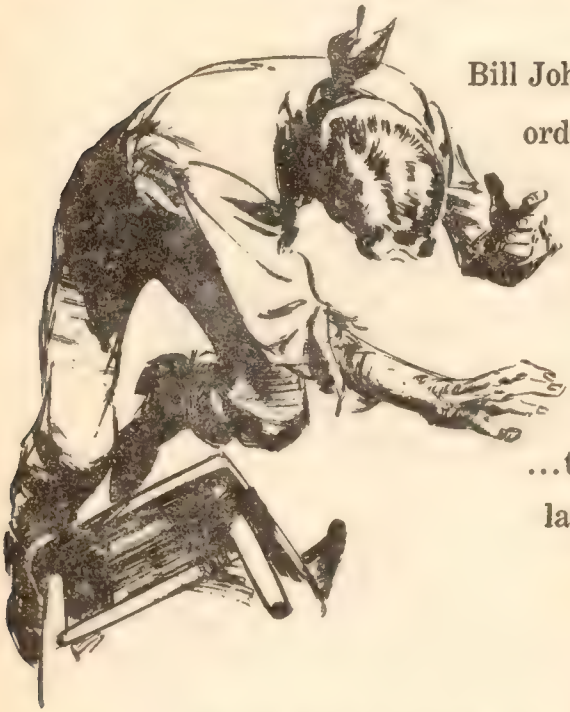
HIDEBOUND

"Johnny," said the teacher,
"Can you tell me whether
There's a use for cowhide
Besides making leather."

Johnny was a wise lad,
With brain as light as feather,
"Sure, that's easy teacher,
It keeps the cow together."

—M. A. Keating

HE KILLED TO KEEP THE TOWN CROOKED!



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"I ain't apologizing to anybody!" Clell said fiercely

Fight or Drift

By GILES A. LUTZ

IT WAS a pretty town, the clump of cottonwoods in the square giving it a green and inviting look. Particularly after a man had traveled through hot and arid land for more miles than he liked to remember.

Clell Jackson led his tired old horse toward the filled horse trough. When he had first seen the trees, he had thought their roots must be touching underground

Always it caught up to him — the ugly black smear on his name

water, and the filled trough gave confirmation to the thought. He restrained the horse, while he dashed handfuls of the cool water into his own face, feeling the grit and dust slip away. Then he stepped aside and let the thirsty animal have its fill.

While the mount drank slobbering mouthfuls, Clell again looked around at the town. The streets were empty, but it was sure enough a pretty place. Pretty enough to make a man settle in it or near.

He shook his head with a weary, heavy gesture. He knew better than to try to settle near a town. He had tried it before, and people would not let him.

He was long, and almost gaunt-thin, and with the dust gone off his face the stamp of immaturity still showed a trace, if the face were viewed closely enough. Nineteen was not a lot of years. They should not have been enough to put that heavy, beaten look into those blue eyes.

The mouth that was cut for laughter, had not known it for a long time. He desperately wanted laughter, he had wandered a lot of miles in search of it. But men would not let him settle long enough for it to come to him.

He rubbed the back of a hand across his bony chin and muttered to the old horse, "We'll stay overnight. No longer."

His baggage was skimpy—a slender roll of blankets behind the cantle, and a black case tied on top of it. The cut of the case told what it contained. It held a fiddle, and it was an odd piece of baggage to belong to a trail-worn rider.

He jumped as a voice spoke, for he had not realized anyone was near. "You play that fiddle?" the voice asked.

CLELL slowly turned his head. He had heard that question before, too many times before. He was afraid the fiddle was becoming a mark of identification, like a brand on a cow. He had even thought of getting rid of it, though down deep he knew he would never do it. His pa had taught him to play it, and his pa had given him the fiddle.

"I play it," he said in a flat voice.

He waited for some sign of recognition to flood over the face of the man who had spoken. It was an old face, lined by years and weather, a harsh face, a judging face, and the eyes—the eyes had appraisal in them, but it looked as though it would be honest appraisal. The man's hair was snow-white, and his white goatee gave him a patrician look.

Clell thought, He's a power around here. And he felt that tightening of dislike. He did not fancy powerful men. They had their own judgment code, and rarely took notice of the weakness of others.

He saw no change come into that lined brown face, at least not the change of which he had been fearful. The eyes glowed as the man raised a hand to touch the fiddle case.

He said, "I'm Mungo Church. I'm glad to see you."

Clell reluctantly took the proffered hand. "Clell Jackson."

He said it with open defiance. Now the recognition would come. He was not ashamed of the name, nothing he had done had sullied it, and that thought had been drummed into his head by his pa.

"Don't you be ashamed of that name," Pa had said. "You had nothing to do with its dirtying."

Pa's tone had always been fierce then, and what he'd said was true. But just the same, it had killed Clell's ma, and he had no doubt it had hastened his pa's end.

He remembered how Pa's shoulder had become stooped, how his step had been uncertain, like the step of a man carrying a weight too heavy for him. The town, where Clell had been raised, had turned cruel. He had been "that Jackson boy," and after his parents were gone, the whispers and furtive looks had eventually driven him away.

Church said, "Big dance tonight. Silas Crews usually plays for us, but he's sick. Can't dance without playing." Those bright eyes studied Clell's face. "If you'll take his place it'll save a powerful lot of people from being disappointed."

Clell shook his head. "Ain't staying

over tonight."

The horse was through drinking, and he took the reins to lead it away.

Church murmured, "Long way to the next town. You leave now means you'll sleep in the open."

His persistence irritated Clell, and he snapped, "I've done that before."

A silvery voice said, "Pa, maybe he can't play, after all."

The girl who had been standing in the thickest shade, had been unnoticed until she came forward. Clell judged her to be not over eighteen, for he was certain he had a bulge of at least a year on her. She had brown hair that the sun touched lovingly, and a wide, generous mouth, shaped for laughter or for kissing. He kind of colored at the last thought; it was an unusual one for him. She had deep brown eyes, with the same knowing look as in her father's.

Her serenity reminded Clell of cool shade after a blazing sun. But she was belittling the one small talent he owned, and it struck instant fire in him.

"I can play," he snapped.

The mockery stayed in her eyes, and he untied the fiddle case. He took the instrument with loving care. Pa had said there had been a fiddling Jackson ever since the first one.

Clell tucked the fiddle under his chin, his eyes defiantly watching the girl's face. She had a sprinkle of freckles across her nose. He thought there had probably been more when she was younger, and the fading of those freckles was a bridge over which a girl walked into womanhood.

He played a lover's lament, soft and indescribably sad, and there were tears in her eyes when he finished.

The tingle in his blood told him it had been good, and the shine in her eyes only emphasized the knowledge. He came back to earth, realizing his playing had drawn a considerable number of people. These were friendly faces surrounding him, and he could not stop the hope swelling in his heart. Then he remembered it was always like that, friendly until they learned, then turning against him.

Mungo Church sighed and said, "Silas never played like that. You have a gift, boy. A gift that was meant to be shared."

The girl touched Clell's wrist with her fingers. The tingle ran wild and hot in his veins, and it was something he had never known before. It was frightening, the way it hastened a man's breathing.

He could not say the refusal on his tongue, not against that appeal so big in her eyes. He nodded with a queer embarrassment, hoping his face was not as red as he felt it must be.

"I'll stay for the dance," he said. The mental reservation "And no more," was strong in his head. But one night should not bring on the old trouble. He would be gone while people still talked of the dance.

He ate supper with Mungo Church, finding it hard to keep his eyes from hunting for Church's daughter. Her name was Becky, and it rolled well off his tongue. Church had a ranch near town, and he could use another hand.

He said, "Even if you can do nothing but play and keep the other boys happy, I'd be satisfied."

Clell said stiffily, "I can ride and rope. Why do people think weak things of a fiddle player?"

Now, why did he say that? He had no intention of staying. He wanted no job with Church.

Church threw back his head and guffawed. He was a big, likable man with a lively sense of humor. "A man has to show his resentment against some things until he's left alone." The humor in his eyes changed to a sharp questioning.

Clell grumbled, and turned the questioning look aside.

He was glad when the dance started. The big-armed desks were pushed to the walls in the schoolhouse, and there was room for five sets. Church was going to do the calling, and he sang out for the partners to come up, while Clell tuned his fiddle.

He looked questioningly at Clell, and Clell nodded.

"Let her go!" Church yelled.

He had a good voice for the calling, and a sense of rhythm. The music put the squares in motion, and Church directed them, his voice as sure as the pull of reins. The room shook with the pound of beating feet, and Clell swung from one tune to another.

During the brief pauses while sets reformed, he noticed that the younger men slipped outside, and he knew that somewhere out there a stone jug was going the rounds. It showed in their eyes when they came back into the room, it showed in the quickened popping out of sweat on their foreheads. It edged their tempers, too, making them a little quarrelsome as they vied for a special partner.

But none of them went after Becky, and Clell wondered about that. She had danced every square with a big, powerful-looking man. He was deliberate and heavy on his feet, and his face was set in painful concentration. It was odd that the younger men never approached her, unless—

Clell's heart tightened. Unless the big man had spoken for her. He scraped out a sour note in the fear of the thought. If she was going to interfere with his playing like that, it was best he put her out of his mind.

It was well after one o'clock when he laid aside his bow. He heard scattered calls for more, and shook his head.

CHURCH gripped his shoulder and said, "You think I'm going to let you go after that. We make a team, boy." He lifted his voice and yelled, "Do you want him to stay for the next dance?" and the room rocked with the fervor of the people's answer.

It made a man feel good until the remembering crept in. He was shaking his head when Becky moved to him and said, "Stay, Clell."

He stared hard into her eyes, trying to read something back of them. The tingle and a heavy pounding was back in his blood.

He found himself nodding, when he had not intended to nod at all. He looked past her and stared into the eyes of her dancing partner. They were cold, watchful eyes, eyes that went first to Becky, then to Clell. They had a driving force when they fastened on Clell's face. They hit him hard and brought a building unease.

The unease gave way to a start of anger. He locked eyes with the big man and said, "I'll stay."

He went home with the Churches and was dismayed to find that the big man rode beside the buckboard for quite a distance. After the big man turned off, Clell learned that he was Owen Allen, the nearest neighbor to the Church ranch. Clell looked at Becky and thought with a sinking, hopeless feeling, that means he'll be around a lot. He remembered the hard weighing in Allen's eyes, and the unease grew.

Owen Allen come over to the Church ranch the next day, supposedly to help with the breaking of a string of two-year-olds. But the morning was not an hour old until Clell was certain that the man was there only to rawhide him. It showed in a dozen little things, in the tone of his voice, in the contemptuous twist of his lips, in his shouldering aside of Clell at every opportunity.

Clell took it all with no more than a protesting glint in his eyes. He saw coldness show in the faces of Church's riders, and thought stubbornly that he did not care.

He tried to prove something to them with his riding. After a piebald stallion had dumped two riders, Clell climbed onto him. Clell was bleeding at the nose when he finished the ride, but the stallion was beaten.

He had not known Becky was watching until she rushed toward him with a little cry. She dabbled at the smear on his face with a handkerchief, and Clell's face turned as red as the stain on the small square. He looked up, and Owen Allen was watching him. Allen's eyes carried a threatening promise, and a tiny shiver touched Clell.

He played the fiddle in the evenings, when he was asked. The music seemed to break down the men's reserve, but it al-

ways came back after he was through. He did not know that each evening he played, Becky listened from her porch of the ranch house. Allen listened, too, and watched Becky's face, and on the following days, his manner toward Clell was more overbearing.

By the end of the week, Allen's temper was ugly. He said things to Clell that no man should have to take, and Clell took them. He had only a few days to finish, then he would be gone. The thought echoed in his mind like a lonely, crying wind. He would not see Becky again, and thinking of it made him physically ill.

The other hands' reserve had grown into open contempt, and Clell knew what they were thinking. No real mean would take the rawhiding Allen was handing out without protest.

Even Church's attitude changed. He came to Clell Friday noon and said, "I was thinking of you staying here for good. There's a nice cabin on a section to the east. A man could buy it at a reasonable price, if he was interested."

His tone said he still tenatively offered help in buying that section, and Clell mumbled, "I'm leaving tomorrow night."

Church's voice was cold as he said, "I figured as much," and his eyes were no longer friendly.

HE WAS turning away when Owen Allen rode into the yard. A shriveled old man rode beside him.

The old man climbed laboriously to the ground and walked toward Clell. His rheumy eyes peered into Clell's face, then he cackled, "That's him. That's Clell Jackson, all right."

Clell felt a tightening in his throat. He did not like the hard, satisfied look in Allen's eyes. He said hoarsely, "Did I ever deny it?"

A bony finger stabbed out at him. "You're Hamp Jackson's brother!" Silas shrieked. "There's bad blood in all you Jacksons."

"You're a dirty liar!" Clell said fiercely.

"Plain resemblance," Silas said with ancient pomposity. "Make it my business to know about every fiddler within a couple of hundred miles." He added with malicious satisfaction, "Saw Hamp hanged. I never a man deserved it, he did."

Pain and fury combined in a cry that choked in Clell's throat. Six years ago Hamp had been hanged. Would they never let him rest?

Silas' loud voice had drawn attention. A half-dozen men drifted to the scene, and out of the corner of his eye, Clell saw Becky approaching.

He said frantically, "What Hamp did was on his own! None of the rest of us had anything to do—" He broke off before all those cold, judging eyes.

Allen said, "After Silas thought he remembered you, I did some wiring. We don't want your kind around. Get."

A man should get used to this, but he never did. It wasn't fair to see all that accusation in men's eyes because of what someone else did, even if that someone had been a man's brother. Clell looked at Becky, and her eyes seemed to be filled with horror and fear.

He said imploringly, "Hamp did some bad things."

That was understatement, if ever there was one. Hamp had turned completely mad-dog, and some of his brutality had shocked even a hard country. Clell always thought that Hamp had gone a little crazy. He had been hounded and hunted until he had struck back viciously. Clell could not help remembering Hamp before he had gone bad, he could not help remembering an older brother's kindness to a scrawny kid.

He said, "They hounded Hamp. They turned him bad."

He stopped helplessly. None of these men wanted to understand. Their cold faces told him that. And because he was a Jackson, every one of them figured the same kind of blood was in him. It had killed Ma and it had hastened Pa's end.

Clell said fiercely, "I ain't apologizing to anybody for being a Jackson!"

Pa had wanted him to be proud of the name, and he was. If people were not so

damned judging, if they would only give him a chance! He was the same Clell Jackson whose music they had enjoyed, the same one . . . He choked off the thought. Not now, he wasn't. He was Hamp Jackson's brother.

Allen said, "Get!" and slapped him across the mouth.

Clell heard Becky's cry. His lips stung inside, and he felt a small moistness across his teeth. Allen's blow had broken his lips. He stared hatingly at the man's face, and all the resentment flooded up in an overwhelming tide. He forgot a promise he made to his ma, a promise never to fight, for it was a fight that had first got Hamp into trouble.

He said in a hushed voice, "Damn you, Allen. You been hating me because—" He left the rest unsaid, not wanting to embarrass Becky. But the thought was true in his mind. Becky had been interested in him.

Allen's lips twisted in a contemptuous smile, and that triggered all the pent-up rage in Clell. He uttered a hoarse, strained cry and lunged forward. He thought, I'm sorry, Ma, I'm sorry. But this time, I've got to!

CLELL came in fast but awkward, having no previous experience in fights. He was outweighed by thirty pounds and was eight years the junior, eight important years in matters like this. His lunge caught Allen by surprise, and the sheer savagery of it carried him to his man. He bounced a fist off Allen's nose, and the blow rocked Allen's head back and pulled a grunt from him.

Clell's advantage was short-lived, for Allen was an old hand at this. Clell's second blow was blocked, then a hard fist pounded into his face. It put flashing stars before his eyes before it blanked out his vision. He did not remember going down.

He opened his eyes and the mixed taste of blood and dust was in his mouth. He stared groggily up at Allen. He could not have been out long. Allen's hands were still raised in a half protective attitude.

It was odd how much a blow like that took out of a man. His mind commanded his legs to lift him, and they stubbornly refused. It took a hard, mean struggle to get his feet back under him. He weaved toward Allen, and swung before he was within range. It twisted him around, carrying him half off-balance, and Allen's knuckles took him behind the ear. The force pitched him forward on his face, and there was more dust in his mouth. He spat it out, openly crying, tears of anger and frustration.

"Damn you, Allen!" he said in a broken whisper. "Just wait—"

Allen waited until Clell was back on his feet, then he moved in. He was a craftsman in matters like this. He hammered in two blows, and something kicked Clell's feet from under him. He thought he heard a faint, far-away scream. Maybe he was doing the screaming. Lord knew he hurt enough.

His struggle to get back on his feet took longer each time, though he did not realize it. His mind was foggy, and his eyes refused to focus. At the start of the fight men had grunted with the landing of blows, and their boots had made little shuffling sounds as they had moved excitedly around. Now there was only silence, as they were held motionless by the sight of a will that would not be broken.

Clell lost track of the times he got up from the ground. The watchers knew, and their eyes grew more awed with each succeeding time. Clell's face was a bloody ruin, and his steps were only shambling movement. He could not raise his hands high enough to protect himself, and his face was an easy and open target.

He was one long reach of pain, and it was a blessing, for it numbed the additional thrusts of Allen's fists. He shuffled forward, his voice coming out in a broken mumble:

"You'll have to kill me, Allen. You'll have to kill me to stop me."

He vaguely realized he should have been hit again by now, for he had covered enough distance to carry him to Allen. He still moved forward, and the shocking blow did not come.

"Stop him, someone!" he heard a voice say.

He caught something in the voice, a tinge of fear, and he had to think about it before he realized who had spoken. It was Allen, but Clell could not figure out why the fear was there.

"Stop him yourself, Allen," an answering voice said. "You started it."

Allen's voice seemed wilder, and Clell desperately tried to fix his eyes upon him. He could see a vague blur before him, and that was all. He moved stubbornly in that direction. If he could just raise those heavy arms!

Allen said, "He's crazy. I've hit him enough to kill him."

The blurred form seemed to be retreating, and Clell staggered after it.

Someone grabbed him around the waist, and Clell tried to scrape off those encircling arms. He was too weak. He could only make futile, pawing sweeps with his hands.

"Stop it, you crazy fool," a voice said in his ear. He struggled until he placed the voice. That was Mungo Church, and Clell let his effort die and leaned hard against the older man.

IT WAS not hard to recognize Becky's voice, even as angry as it was. "Get off this place, Owen Allen!" she cried. "And don't you ever come back!"

Clell thought he heard retreating footsteps, but he could not be sure.

"You whipped him," Church said. "By taking the damnest beating a man ever took. You coming back for more long after you should've been out broke him. It takes a tough man to stand up against that. Owen ain't that tough."

Clell's legs gave way, and he sat down. A ring of faces were around him, though he could not pick out the individual ones. One of them said, "He's a ring-tailed cat. Me, I don't ever want any part of him."

Clell caught the admiration in the voice, and it made him want to cry.

Church said, "He won't bother you again, boy. Nobody will. All you ever have to do is to make a stand and stop people from wondering. When they get to wondering, they get cruel. I guess they can't help it."

Clell was so tired it was effort to hold his head up. The pain was making itself noticeable, too.

He said earnestly, "I promised Ma I'd never fight. Hamp killed a man in a fight. The man's friends ran Hamp, and it turned him mean. You see—" His voice trailed away. That was personal business, and he had never talked of it before.

Church said, "None of us knew. Your Ma got a good promise from you in the main. But sometimes a man has to break a promise like that when something important comes along." His voice was like it had been last Saturday night, warm and friendly.

Clell felt the soft fan of breath on his right cheek. He couldn't see very well, but he knew Becky was there. "Your poor hand," she said.

He stared at it, not able to see it too clearly. He could feel a sting in it, though. Probably barked it on Allen's head. "It's nothing," he said. "I can play tomorrow night."

Her finger-tips touched his face. "And your eyes," she sobbed.

He did not need eyes to play. The playing came from the ends of his fingers. He did not need eyes to remember her, but he wished he could see her now.

He said hesitantly, "I thought—I kind of figured—" He hesitated, then blurted it out, "The way Allen kept everybody away—"

Church chuckled. "Becky's been fuming about that. I told her when the right one came along, he'd run Allen off. Looks like I was right."

Clell felt his cheeks go hot.

Becky said softly, "Tomorrow night, I'm not dancing. I'm sitting beside you to listen to you play.

He did not care how many were looking. He reached out and touched her hand. He might even let her have a dance or two with some lucky fellow. A man did not mind little things like that at all as long as he knew where he stood. ● ● ●

"Set down, pard," said Slant-eye

Not The Marrying Kind

By BEN FRANK

THE moment Martin Maryott Mason opened his eyes, he knew something was wrong. But he didn't hear nothing unusual. Everything in the front room of his two-roomed ranch house seemed normal. Then suddenly, he knew what it was and it like to scared him to death. He had been awakened by the odors of cooking food!

Heart hammering, he lay there, a long, lean, straw-haired young man, straining his big sunburned ears for some sound.

Marty Mason didn't have nothing against marriage—

so long as he wasn't the one to get roped in

Now that he was fully awake, he saw that the door between the front room and the kitchen had been closed. And he'd slept through all the various sounds that must have preceded these delightful and mouth-watering smells. He felt a chill fiddle along his spine.

He thought, A wonder I ain't dead!

Now, the horrible truth was that, Martin Maryott Mason, commonly known as Marty, wouldn't have been surprised at all to wake up and find his throat slit. So he certainly hadn't aimed to fall asleep in broad daylight with all doors and windows wide open.

He'd simply come to the house to fix his dinner and got to thinking about all his troubles. Seeing no reason why he couldn't worry just as well lying down as standing up, he'd sprawled out on his bunk and dozed off.

The next thing he'd known, he was sniffing cooking smells that had no business being there to be sniffed.

Fumbling for his sixgun, he got up and eased over to the kitchen door. He thought he heard someone singing, but that hardly seemed likely, so he decided the sound must be made by the wild drumming of blood through his head. Drawing a deep breath, he flung the door wide and stepped into the room, ready for the worst.

But he wasn't prepared for the sight the sight that met his eyes.

A slip of a girl, in a dark riding skirt and a white blouse, stood by the rusty range, stirring something in a pan.

"So at last you woke up," she said, without turning around.

But he knew her the moment he saw that fine golden hair showering about her slim shoulders.

She was old Coon-dog Custer's granddaughter, who'd come from some place in Ohio to spend her vacation with the old gent.

"What're you doing here?" Marty gurgled.

"Getting dinner," she answered. Then she turned around and smiled, causing Marty to gasp sharply for breath.

HER name was Sally. Five-foot-two or -three, eyes that were astonishingly brown, dimples, a soft red mouth, she was the kind of a girl who makes a fellow think of apple blossoms, honey and spring sunshine after a rain.

"You see," she said, "I came over to discuss an important matter with you. Finding you asleep, I decided to pass the time by washing all those dirty dishes you had stacked around. Then, since you were still sleeping, I thought I might as well go ahead and get dinner."

"Oh, I see," Marty murmured, dropping weakly down on the nearest chair. "Now, this important matter—"

"It can keep until we've eaten," she said.

Hungry? Suddenly Marty was as hungry as a coyote that had spent the winter on a cocklebur diet.

"Pull up a chair and get busy," she said.

She sat down across the rickety table from him. She was young and healthy and had a good appetite herself, but she couldn't hold a candle to Marty. After she'd finished, he was still going strong. Smiling happily, she leaned back in her chair and watched him.

"Nothing I like better than to watch a hungry young man eat my cooking," she said.

"Nothing I'd druther do than eat it," Marty returned.

But at last he reached the limit of his capacity and had to give up.

"Now," he said, sighing contentedly, "you can tell me about this important matter, and if there's any way I can help you—"

"You certainly can help me, all right," she said. "It's like this, Marty. I didn't exactly come out to this country to visit my grandpa. I came to stay, to find a husband, to live on a ranch and raise a family. You see, I got tired of being an old maid schoolteacher back East, so knowing that out here there are many more men than women and a girl can take her pick, I—"

"Afraid I can't help you, after all," Marty broke in in a frightened voice. "I

don't know nothing about—"

"How old are you, Marty?"

"Twenty-five, but—"

"Just the right age for me," Sally said dreamily. "I'm twenty-two."

Marty suddenly felt as if he'd stepped over a high cliff. Not that he had anything against marriage—as long as he wasn't involved. But to have one of Cupid's arrows aimed at him was something else.

His eyes shifted about wildly, seeking escape. But there wasn't any escape, for Sally had moved to the one and only doorway, where she stood eying him in a businesslike way.

"You're single," she continued calmly. "Not bad-looking in a long, hungry way. You own the Bar M and—"

"Marrying me," Marty interposed desperately, "would be worse than setting on a keg of powder with the fuse lit."

"What do you mean?" she asked, her brown eyes narrowing.

"I," Marty said, gathering strength as he went along, "with all my troubles, would be a mighty poor risk."

"Troubles?"

"Yeah," Marty said, encouraged by her worried expression. "To begin with, cattle prices have skidded, and I have no idea how I can pay the interest I owe the bank."

"Well, I've saved some money."

"You wouldn't want to marry anybody as unlucky as me. Why, just yesterday, Red, my best horse, stepped in a hole and sprained his left shoulder. Bought a new pair of boots, and now I got a corn on my right big toe the size of a doorknob. Well's gone dry on my east range."

"Grandpa's got some special liniment for sprains," Sally said, smiling again. "We can get your boots stretched, and one of these days it will rain."

"Another thing," Marty broke in hoarsely, "a couple years ago, I caught a desperado by the name of Slant-eye Slater. He—"

"How wonderful, Marty!" Sally's eyes glowed with excitement. "I've always dreamed of marrying a hero!"

[*Turn page*]

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"I'm no hero," Marty bleated. "I caught him by accident. I climbed up on a ledge to pick some wild grapes, and this Slant-eye hombre rode up and stopped in the shade. I leaned over for a better look at him, slipped and fell slap-dab on top of him, knocking him cold."

SALLY said, "I've always admired modest men."

"Dang it all!" Marty yelled. "That's what our crazy sheriff said. Even made me take the reward money. That's how I got started in the ranching business. But I tell you, it was an accident! And now this killer has escaped from prison and is on his way here to get even with me. You wouldn't want to get married and then be a widow before the honeymoon's over."

"Well, Marty," she said, sighing deeply, "since you're so dead set against marrying me, you'll just have to help me find someone else who will."

"Glad to!" Marty said, so vastly relieved that he was willing to promise her anything. "Now, there's Toots Telford who works on the Triangle. About my age. Trouble with Toots, though, he throws his money away something awful."

"I can probably teach him to save his money," Sally said cheerfully. "Go on, Marty."

"There's Plug Adams—he owns the Lazy A. Likely got the first dime he ever made and needs a wife to boot. But he must be over forty and—well, I guess you wouldn't want to marry someone that old."

"I've often heard that older men make the best husbands," Sally said thoughtfully. "Is there anyone else?"

Marty scowled fiercely. "There's Frosty Fry who owns the Frying-pan spread. But you won't want nothing to do with a coyote like him."

"Why not?" Sally said, suddenly looking interested. "Is he tall, dark and handsome?"

"Yeah," Marty admitted, "he's all of that."

His scowl deepened. For years, he and Frosty Fry had been rivals, and now that they owned adjoining ranches, their rivalry had turned to bitter hatred. Especially since Marty's well had gone dry and he'd had to depend entirely on Crow Creek for water. Frosty, the big black-headed horse-thief, was trying to hog water and steal Marty's grass as well.

"But looks ain't everything," Marty added quickly.

"When a girl gets to be an old maid, she can't be too particular," Sally said sadly.

"You're not old," Marty declared. "Besides, you're the prettiest girl in—"

Suddenly realizing he was off on the wrong foot for a gent who intended to stay single, he closed his big mouth with a snap. Then in order to be on the safe side, he promised to send the three prospects around to old Coon-dog Custer's homestead so Sally could look them over and take her pick.

"Just for that, Marty," she said, giving him a warm, friendly smile, "I'll take your lame horse home for Grandpa to doctor. And if you'll get me a needle and thread, I'll—"

"Never mind," Marty said hastily. "I don't mind wearing a shirt without buttons."

"You're sweet, Marty," she said and, reaching up, she kissed him on the cheek. "Come over Sunday to see how your horse is getting along."

With that, she made her departure, leaving poor Martin Maryott Mason standing by the barn, not sure whether he was coming or going.

But an hour or so after she'd gone, Marty's mind stopped whirling, and he could think. And the more he thought, the less he liked the whole set-up. Toots Telford wasn't nothing more than a wild, no-good cowboy. Plug Adams was old enough to be Sally's pa, besides being slow-witted and bald as a duck egg. As for Frosty Fry—

Marty snorted angrily through his long, sun-burned nose. Frosty was a love-'em-and-leave-'em young man totally unfit for any nice girl like Sally to marry.

"Why," Marty yelled aloud, "She'd be better off married to me and all my troubles than to that snake-in-the-grass!"

And still thinking of Frosty, he decided to ride over to Crow Creek to have a look at things. So, saddling his second string horse, he mounted and rode to the creek.

JUST as he expected, a bunch of Frying-pan cattle stood knee-deep in the deepest water hole, switching at the flies and drinking thirstily. But before Marty could get around to driving them away, Frosty himself came galloping up over a slope, looking mean enough to shoot his best friend. Seeing Marty, he dropped a hand to his sixgun.

"Wasn't thinking about driving my cows out of there, was you, Marty?" he asked grimly.

Marty was on the verge of blowing a gasket when he remembered his promise to Sally. Although he didn't like it no two ways from hell and back, a promise was a promise. And knowing Frosty, he knew exactly the right thing to say.

"Might drive them cows out if I had time," he said as pleasantly as possible. "But I'm on my way to visit my girl."

"Your girl?" Frosty's dark eyes narrowed. "Who's that?"

"Sally Custer. And you stay away from her!"

With that, Marty rode from sight among the trees, figuring the first thing Frosty would do would be to go see Sally. Later, sure that the black-headed coyote had gone on, Marty returned to the creek and drove the Frying-pan cattle homeward.

When he returned to the Bar M ranch house, he found Plug Adams sitting in the shade, fanning his seamy face with a ragged old black hat.

"Like to borrow your post-hole digger, Marty," he mumbled.

Marty got the digger for him.

"Plug, you ever think about getting married?"

"Been thinkin' about it quite a bit lately," Plug said, blushing. "You know that Widow Wilson woman?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Her?" Marty snorted disdainfully. "Plug, you wouldn't marry someone like her when there's a young, beautiful girl just dying for you to make the first move?"

"Who're you talking about?" Plug asked.

"Sally Custer."

"You mean she wants me to marry her?"

"She asked me all about you," Marty said. "She likes older men. Says they make better husbands than young squirts like me."

"Well, I'll be dogged!" Plug said, clamping his hat on over his shiny bald head. "Never had no idea she had fell for me, Marty. Thanks for telling me."

Looking somewhat dazed, he mounted his horse and rode away.

That night, thinking of Frosty or Plug or Toots Telford as Sally's husband, Marty could hardly go to sleep.

"Why, oh why," he moaned, "can't she be satisfied like me to stay single?"

But the way of womankind was far beyond the understanding of a befuddled young cowboy like Martin Maryott Mason.

The next day, he rode to the little trail-end town of Redcliff, and the first person he met was Toots Telford.

"Marty, you old rascal," Toots yelled happily, "ain't seen you for a month! Come on and let me buy you a drink."

Marty shook his head. Looking at the red-headed, wild-eyed Toots, he didn't feel thirsty at all.

"I guess you've seen Sally Custer," he said.

"Seen her!" Toots shouted. "I've been trying to get up nerve enough to speak to her."

"Well then, you'd better start getting busy," Marty said. "That girl's crazy about you. Said she wished you'd come to see her."

"No fooling?" Toots said, almost swallowing his cigar.

"Understand she's saved some money," Marty went on, "and wants to marry a young cowboy."

"Marty," Toots said huskily, "if she's got some money saved, I'm her boy!"

Sighing drearily, Marty went to pay a visit to the bank. He thought bitterly, I shouldn't of let her scare me into playing Cupid for her.

Once inside the bank, it didn't take him long to learn the sad truth. If he didn't come across with the interest money, the bank was going to make him sell his cattle, low prices or not. More worried than ever, Marty stepped out into the bright sunshine and met Sheriff Platt face to face.

"Nope," the sheriff said, mopping his red face, "ain't heard no more about Slant-eye Slater. But you keep your eyes open, son. That hombre's pure poison, and he hates you from the ground up for capturing him."

"But," Marty bleated, "I didn't do it on purpose."

Platt grinned and shook his head. "Son, going around and claiming it was an accident ain't going to save your neck."

MARTY stumbled on to where he'd left his horse. Life sure had all of a sudden got mighty complicated. It was enough to drive a kind and gentle young man like Martin Maryott Mason plumb loco.

Then upon arriving home, he found Sally Custer there, waiting for him.

"Thought I'd come to tell you that Red's shoulder is almost well," she said, smiling like a burst of music. "Grandpa says you can come after him Sunday." Then, sobering, "You haven't forgot your promise to help me catch a husband, have you?"

"I've talked to all three gents about you," he said glumly.

"Marty," she said warmly, "you're a dear!"

The next thing he knew, she'd pulled his face down and given him another kiss on the cheek. Before he could recover from the whirling sensation in his head, she had swung aboard her pinto and was riding briskly away.

The next day being Sunday, Marty slicked back his straw-colored hair, donned his newest pair of levis and the

too-tight boots and rode to old Coon-dog Custer's homestead. The front door of the cabin was shut and a note had been fastened to it.

Somewhat big-eyed, Marty read:

> Dear Marty, Sorry not to be here, but have gone for a buggy ride with one of my boy friends. You'll find Red in the barn.
>
> Sally

Snorting furiously, Marty limped toward the barn. He couldn't remember the day when he'd been so hungry for home cooking. Or so downright disappointed.

Going into the barn, he found Red in a box stall, looking slick as a button and well-cared-for. He led the horse outside and was pleased to see that he scarcely limped. Just as he was about to head for home with Red in tow, Coon-dog Custer came hobbling up, a bunch of hounds yapping along behind him.

"Before you take that horse home," the whiskery oldster said, "I'll give that shoulder one more treatment."

He went into the barn and came out with a whisky bottle well filled with an amber-colored liquid.

"Mighty potent brew," he said, rubbing the liquid on Red's shoulder. "Make it myself from my granddaddy's recipe."

"Kind of figured I'd see Sally today," Marty murmured.

Old Coon-dog didn't say anything one way or the other about Sally. Instead he said: "Use this same medicine on my dogs when they get stoved up. Even use it on myself. You ain't got no sprained muscles, have you, Marty?"

Marty shook his head. "I ought to thank Sally for bringing my horse over here. Guess I'll come over to see her tomorrow evening."

"Feller sure wouldn't want to drink this liniment," Coon-dog said, replacing the cork. "Likely set him afire."

"Tell Sally I'll see her tomorrow evening."

Scowling, Marty rode homeward. But it wasn't long until he stopped and stared thoughtfully into the distance, and mumbled:

[*Turn page*]

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"No reason why I should find out who's took her buggy riding this afternoon."

Trailing Red, he rode straight to Plug Adams's place, and there was Plug, lying on the grass in the shade of his ramshackle house, sleeping soundly. Without waking the man, Marty turned toward the Triangle. But on the way, he met Toots Telford headed toward Redcliff

Marty thought angrily, So Sally's with that ornery, slick-haired Frosty Fry!

Arriving home, he went into his two-roomed house to cook dinner, even if he wasn't hungry. But something on the rickety table caught his attention. A ragged piece of brown paper on which were printed the words:

LUCKY THING YOU WASNT TO HOME
BUT I WILL BE BACK AGAIN AS SOON
AS I FINISH UP ANOTHER LITTLE JOB
SLANT-EYE SLATER

Feeling a chill slide along his spine, Marty put the note into a pocket, rushed outside, resaddled his second string horse and rode toward town at a fast clip. This note, he knew, was something the sheriff should be told about immediately.

BUT luck was against him. The sheriff was out of town, so Marty had to round up Slim Lester, the deputy, and show him the note.

"I wouldn't never thought that sidewinder would warn one of his victims like that," Slim said. "But that's the trouble with a crazy killer like Slant-eye. You really never don't know what he will do."

"What do you suppose he means by taking care of another job first?" Marty asked.

"No telling." The bony deputy suddenly looked scared. "Maybe he was refering to me and the sheriff. He don't like us none too well, either. Marty, if I was you I'd stay in town until this business blows over."

"Me? With a well gone dry and all them cattle with the prices shot to hell?" Marty wailed. "I can't do that."

But the deputy was too worried about his own neck to express any further sympathy for Marty. Sighing, the straw-headed cowboy mounted his horse and rode from town.

That night, he barred the door, nailed down the windows and slept with his gun under his pillow. Nothing happened. Feeling somewhat reassured by the bright morning sunshine, he ate a hearty breakfast and rode to the creek. Not a Frying-pan steer was in sight. Whistling cheerfully, but keeping an eye open for danger, he rode back home. Everything was just as he'd left it. Except that he had a visitor. Old Coon-dog Custer, his ragged whiskers blowing in the breeze.

"Sally sent me over with a note for you, son," the oldster wheezed and handed over a sealed envelope.

Marty opened the letter and read:

Dear Marty,
Grandpa said you planned to come to see me this evening. Please don't come, because I am expecting other company. And thank you again for telling those three nice men about me.

Sally

"Bad news, son?" old Coon-dog asked.

"Looky here," Marty sputtered, "you wouldn't want Sally to marry a no-good like Toots Telford, would you? Or Frosty Fry? Or—"

"About time she was marrying somebody," the old man said, climbing stiffly into the saddle. With the breeze still tugging at his ragged whiskers, he kicked his horse in the ribs and rode away, leaving Marty staring angrily after him.

"Why, the danged old cuss!" Marty fumed. "He acts like he wants to get rid of Sally. I bet her wanting to get married is his idea! Poor kid likely has to get married so's to have a home out here."

Then he thought of the way sunlight turned Sally's hair to gold. The dimples that came to her cheeks when she smiled. The two times she'd kissed him in a sisterly way. Suddenly he felt as fluttery as a candle flame on a windy day and it like to scared him to death. Right then, he resolved to forget the whole miserable business of Sally Custer's romancing.

Two uneventful days passed, during which Marty stuck close to home. But the lack of action was almost more than

he could stand. In fact, he got so jittery he couldn't hardly eat or sleep. Then along toward the end of the third day, who should come to see him but Sally herself, looking as pretty as a summer day, riding the pinto her coon-hunting grandfather had given her.

"Hi, Marty," she said, sliding to the ground with a swish of skirts and a pleasant smile.

Marty suddenly found himself having trouble breathing.

"Are you all right, Marty?" she asked anxiously. "You look kind of hollow-eyed and pale."

"I'm fine," Marty said chokingly.

"How's Red?" she asked.

"As good as new," he answered. "Started riding him some today."

"Grandpa will be glad to know that," she said.

"How's everything coming with you?"

"Oh, I'm having a wonderful time," she said. "Marty, I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me."

Marty ground his teeth. "Which one have you decided to marry?"

She chuckled and swung her golden head. "You'll find out when the wedding's announced." Glancing at her watch, she frowned. "Goodness, I must hurry home! I don't like to be late for a date, you know."

THAT was when Marty remembered Slant-eye Slater and suddenly felt a new and different worry.

"Say," he said, "don't you know it ain't safe for a girl to be riding around alone." Quickly he told her about the outlaw's note and saw her eyes darken with worry.

"Oh, Marty!" she cried. "I thought you were making up that story about him so that—" She suddenly turned pink and looked prettier than ever.

But Marty was too worried about her safety to notice.

"I better see you home," he said, hitching up his gun.

He saddled Red, and they rode side by side through the gathering twilight to

[*Turn page*]

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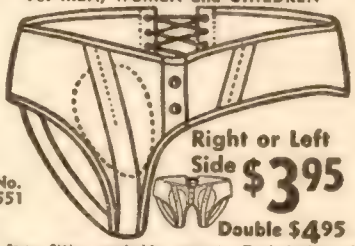

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the Custer homestead. In spite of being afraid that Slant-eye Slater might pop up from behind every boulder, Marty enjoyed every moment of the ride and hinted that he wasn't in any hurry to return home. But Sally wouldn't let him stay.

"Two's company and three's a crowd," she said, giving him a sweet smile. "You understand, don't you, Marty?"

Grumbling, he said he understood. Then he started to tell her why she shouldn't marry any one of the three gents he'd sent her way. But she just laughed at him and shut the door in his face. Feeling lower than a ditchdigger's broken-down arches, he headed homeward.

But he hadn't reached Crow Creek when the sudden appearance of a horseman sent a chill through him. Until he saw that the rider wasn't nobody but Sheriff Platt.

"My deputy told me about that note from Slant-eye," the sheriff said. "Also, there's a rumor going around town that Slant-eye has been seen. Marty, you better move to town until we catch up with that bush-whacking son."

Marty shook his head. Someway or other, he didn't no longer much care what happened to him.

"Well," Platt growled, "if you wake up dead some morning, don't never say I didn't warn you."

With that, he shook out the reins and rode on toward town.

The next day, Marty went to the creek and found more of Frosty Fry's cattle soaking up water and chomping grass. Cussing, he drove them back onto the Frying-pan range. Later, when he returned home, he found Plug Adams sitting in the shade, fanning his bald head with his ragged old hat.

"Brought back your post-hole digger," Plug said.

"How you and Sally Custer getting along?" Marty asked.

"Well, to be honest about it," Plug said, looking embarrassed, "I ain't never gone to see her. I got to thinking it over and decided she's too young for me. So I popped the question to the Widow Wilson and she took me up . . . Say, you ain't sore because I didn't go to see that Custer girl, are you?"

"No, I ain't sore," Marty said feebly.

Looking relieved, Plug climbed aboard his horse and rode away.

Scowling, Marty went into the house to cook his dinner. So, he thought, Sally was going to marry either the no-good Toots or that ornery Frosty. Well, let her marry 'em both if she wanted to for all—

That was as far as he got, for at that moment he saw another note propped up on the rickety table. It said:

> Now that I have got that other job done it is your turn.
>
> Slant-eye Slater

For a minute, Marty just stood there, the cold clammy sweat oozing out on his bony brow. Then recoving some from shock, he rushed out to his horse and rode toward Redcliff at a fast pace, intending to tell the sheriff what had happened. But he hadn't gone no farther than the creek when he met the sheriff heading a posse.

"Marty," the sheriff bellowed furiously, "somebody held up and robbed the Overland Stage last night. We found some horse tracks, but we still don't know who did it."

"I reckon this will tell you who did it," Marty said grimly as he gave Slant-eye's second note to the sheriff.

Platt took one glance at it, cussed, and

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By STEUART EMERY

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waved his arms. "Come on, men! Let's run the varmint down!"

YELLING, the riders wheeled toward the timbered foothills. All save one—Toots Telford. He sat on his horse, glaring at Marty.

"Marty," Toots said coldly, "I've got a good notion to punch you on the nose, telling me that Sally Custer had fell for me! Know what? I tried to ask to come to see her and she give me a look that would freeze up a fire in a haymow. Damn it all, Marty, I don't like being made a fool of, even by my best friend, and—"

"You coming, Toots, or ain't you?" Sheriff Platt bawled.

Giving Marty one last baleful glare, Toots wheeled his horse and followed the riders.

Too stunned to move, Marty just sat there on his red horse. Anyway he figured it, Plug Adams and Toots Telford hadn't never done any romancing with Sally. Therefore, the gent who had been rushing her was none other than Frosty Fry. And knowing this, and also remembering all the trouble that Frosty had been causing him throughout the years, the straw-headed cowboy felt a great anger rising within him. Suddenly, with a great roar of rage, he aimed the big red horse straight at the Frying-pan and shook out the reins.

Ariving at Frosty Fry's house, Marty hit the ground with a furious jangle of spurs. He couldn't remember the day when he'd been mad enough to tear a man limb from limb. Once and for all time, he was going to settle with his old enemy. Baring his teeth, he kicked the door open and rushed in—and there wasn't anybody at home.

Snorting like a sod-pawing bull, Marty ran to the barn. Wasn't no one there, either. But he'd made up his mind to lick Frosty on this very day, or die in the attempt. So he sat down to wait the return of the Frying-pan owner.

Eventually, Frosty came riding out of the timber. But he wasn't alone. Sheriff

[*Turn page*]

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Platt and his posse were with him.

"What do you know, Marty?" the sheriff said. "It waren't Slant-eye who robbed the stage, after all. It was this ornery son. We knew it the minute we caught up with Frosty and saw that his horse made the same kind of tracks as the horse of the gent who held up the stage. Knowing we had him cold, he's confessed to everything. Even admitted he left them notes at your place and started the rumor that Slant-eye was back. Figured maybe he'd kill two birds with one stone. Scare you off your ranch and lay the hold-up on Slant-eye. Now we've come here to pick up the loot."

At first, Marty was too dazed to think. But when he did get his brain back in gear, his anger returned.

"Sheriff," he yelled, "just give me one good crack at that slick-haired cuss!"

"Keep your shirt on, Marty," Platt said. "From now on you won't have to worry about him bothering you."

"It's not that, Sheriff," Marty cut in, advancing grimly toward the cowering Frosty. "It's the idea of him deceiving a nice girl like Sally Custer and promising to marry her that burns me up. Step aside, and I'll fix him!"

"I didn't go near that girl!" Frosty bleated. "Sheriff, I'm your prisoner and you got to protect me from that crazy galoot!"

"What?" Marty gurgled. "You didn't go near Sally?"

Somehow he knew that Frosty had spoken the truth. So there could be only one conclusion. Sally Custer hadn't had no men running after her like she'd claimed. She'd just been putting on an act to outsmart and worry him. Again a great wrath shook Marty.

"She can't do that to me!" he yelled. And leaping into the saddle, he tore off across the country to old Coon-dog Custer's homestead.

The farther and faster he rode, the more outraged and angry he felt. By the time he reached the Custer home, he was so steamed up that he never once thought of danger. Which was a mistake, for he walked straight into trouble.

Slant-eye Slater happened to be there ahead of him. He'd found Sally alone and was now forcing her to fix up some grub for him.

"Talk about luck!" Slant-eye gloated. He was a skinny little coyote, with a knife scar that pulled the corner of his left eye down. Grinning he helped himself to Marty's gun. "No sooner do I find a pretty girl to feed me than in walks the very gent I came back to kill. Set down, pard, while I eat."

MARTY sat down. He looked at Sally and saw the terror in her eyes. Suddenly he wasn't angry with her. And just as suddenly he was as scared as she was. Not for himself, but for her.

"Only thing I need to make my day complete," the outlaw was saying, "is a few snorts of red-eye." He turned his leering gaze on Sally. "Any liquor around here, sister?"

Sally shook her head. And Marty had an inspiration.

3 BIG NOVELS

in the Fall

TRIPLE WESTERN

• •

TRAIL OF THE DAMNED
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By LAURAN PAINE

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•

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"Don't tell me your grandpa has drunk up that bottle of whisky he had hid in the barn," he said.

Sally stared at him blankly. Then something flickered in her brown eyes.

"I forgot about that," she said faintly.

"Come on, both of you," Slant-eye said, running his tongue over his thin lips. "We'll find that bottle."

They went out to the barn. It was Sally who found the whisky bottle and uncorked it, taking her time about it.

"I ain't had a good drink since I busted out of jail," Slant-eye said hoarsely. "Damn it, hand over that bottle!"

Sally handed him the bottle.

"My lucky day!" the outlaw said, and put the bottle to his mouth and took a big greedy gulp.

Right then, he forgot he had a gun leveled at Marty. He even forgot he had a gun. All he could think of was maybe he had a mouth full of hornets mixed up with a peck of red pepper.

With a howl of pain, he dropped old Coon-dog Custer's home-made horse liniment and headed straight for the water tank. But he didn't get no farther than the barn door before Marty caught him and knocked him colder than a cellarful of shivers.

The next thing Marty knew, he had Sally in his arms and she was clinging to him and crying. Having but one thing to say to her now, he said it in the best way he knew how.

"But, Marty," she sobbed, "You wouldn't want to marry a girl who—a girl who planned from the very first to marry you and then deliberately tricked you into—" Seeing she was wasting her breath, she let it go at that.

And, in case you're interested, the reward for capturing Slant-eye a second time paid Marty's interest at the bank with enough left over for a short honeymoon. Also, the price of cattle went up by the time spring rolled around again.

Which, as old Coon-dog Custer said, was a good thing for a young man like Martin Maryott Mason, who had a wife and family to support.

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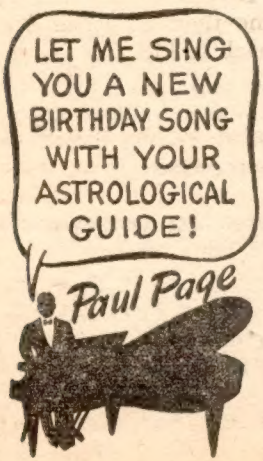

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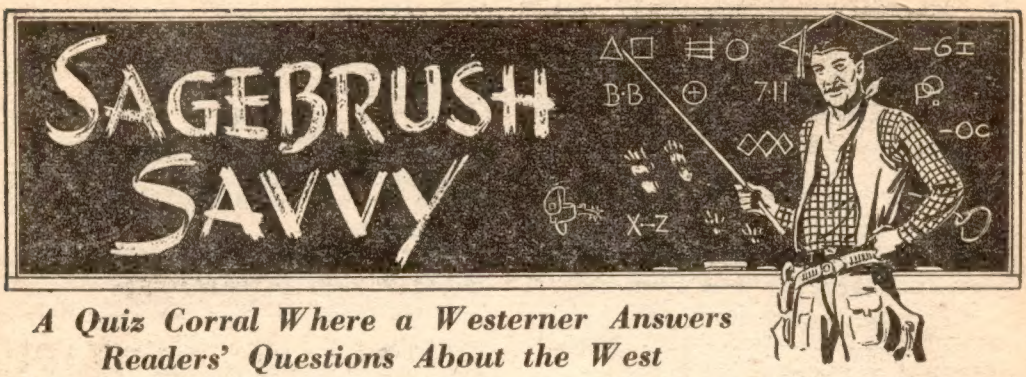

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—I understand that bears do not often kill cattle, but when they do, how do they go about it?—R.R.G. (Ill.)

A.—Grizzlies are very often cattle killers, black and cinnamon bears usually are not, but once in a while one of them "goes wrong" and once started eating fresh killed beef will usually keep it up until somebody's bullet cures him. I have often seen the "sign" of bruin beef butchering, though I have never actually observed one. Judging from the "sign", here is about what happens. Mr. Bruin approaches till he's within fifty or a hundred yards of a cow or cattle, usually in the night, then makes his run. Being mighty speedy when he wants to be, the bear usually overtakes a cow within a hundred or two hundred yards. Running alongside, he grabs her by the nose, or by any other front hold he can get, with his teeth. Sometimes he crowds ahead of a fear-crazed critter, rears suddenly and deals her a wallop on neck or head with a front paw. This may break her neck if it lands right. In either case, bruin's first assault usually gets the critter down, after which he may kill with either paw or teeth, but always doing his business on the head or neck. If a cow is big enough to put up a fight, Mr. Bruin rears on his hind feet for the battle so he can use both paws and teeth. A grizzly once killed 19 head of my father's cattle before he was finally put out of business. One of those cattle was an adult bull that evidently put up a good fight, judging from the way his whole front end was ripped and torn. Most cows killed by bear that I have seen have either had their necks broken or have been bitten through nose, head or neck, sometimes both. Sometimes their ears have been torn to shreds, indicating that bruin's first few grabs failed to get a good hold.

Q.—Who was, or is, Con Price?—F.J.R. (Idaho)

A.—Con Price, an old cowboy still living in Napa, Calif., was for some years the ranching partner of the famous cowboy artist, Charlie Russell. He has written two salty books of reminiscences about those old days with Russell in Montana.

Q.—Are coyotes cowards?—W.H.B. (N.J.).

A.—If being smart enough to sneak or run away from danger with which he is not equipped to cope means being a coward, then the answer would be "yes". But a coyote will fight valiantly when cornered and can usually whip any dog within ten pounds of his weight. In trapping coyotes and bobcats I have noticed that a trapped bobcat will usually come at you snarling, whereas a coyote will often cringe low to the ground or try frantically to escape as you approach. A trapped bobcat looks you right in the eye, but I have often seen trapped coyotes do their best to avoid looking directly at the trapper as he approaches.

Q.—I have heard that keeping pet deer is dangerous. Is this true?—Hal (Ohio.).

A.—Very much so. Not only bucks with antlers, either, though bucks are especially dangerous when in the mating musk. There are many recorded instances of supposedly very gentle does killing people with their sharp hooves.

—S. Omar Barker.

—Continued from back cover

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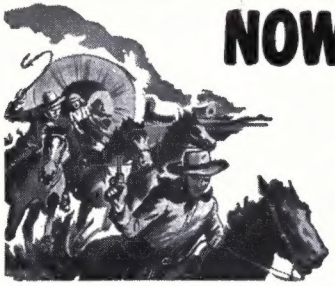

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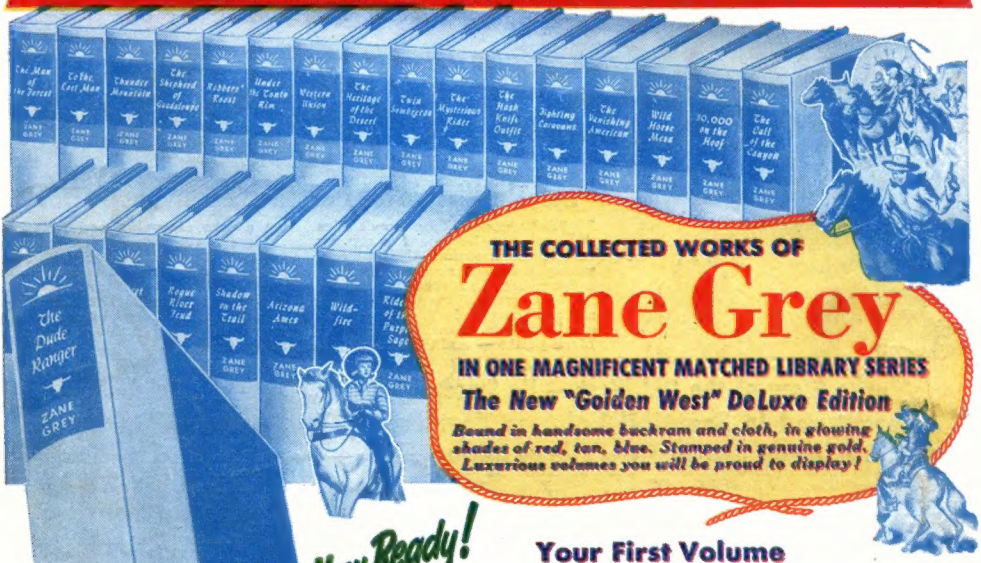

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